Mortimer Rutherford, "portly, preened, preserved in the very best brandy," was found on Thursday—burned to a fine turn in his "fireproofed" chair. Only Webster Flagg, his part-time houseman, suspects that the combustion was not exactly spontaneous. Thursday was Flagg's "day" for Rutherford, but his key to the apartment was missing. Furthermore, he knew that Rutherford had given up smoking, rather than brandy, after he had almost incinerated himself twice before.

Realizing that any one of his other clients might be the murderer, Flagg pokes among the embers in all the family hearths and proves to the culprit that fooling with fire can backfire.

About the author

Veronica Parker Johns has written three other mystery novels and a number of short stories, three of which won prizes in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* contests. She has been active in Connecticut politics, knows jazz and show music, exhibits prize-winning dogs in dog shows. An indefatigable member of Mystery Writers of America, Mrs. Johns does a little of everything, from acting as Secretary to running the annual Edgar Awards banquet.

VERONICA PARKER JOHNS



MURDER BY THE DAY

COLLIER BOOKS
NEW YORK, N.Y.

This Collier Books edition is published by arrangement with the author

Collier Books is a division of The Crowell-Collier Publishing Company

First Collier Books Edition 1962

Hecho en los E E U U
Printed in the United States of America

Murder by the Day

1

MORTIMER RUTHERFORD was murdered on Thursday, so Webster should have found the body. Thursday was Mr. Rutherford's Day, fixed in its orbit, not to be tampered with nor changed for such minor considerations as life and death, not even Mr. Rutherford's own personal death. His soul, the existence of which many persons doubted, must now be fidgeting about the apartment, his ectoplasmic fingers trailing through the dust, for Mr. Rutherford had been a very fastidious gentleman who would prefer to give up his ghost, if any, in impeccable surroundings.

Although the presence of soul and ghost was debatable, Mr. Rutherford had definitely possessed a body, portly, preened, preserved in the very best brandy. The only reason Webster had not found it was that on that particular Thursday Mr. Rutherford's door had been locked to him. Not because of pique, for despite their quarrel of the preceding Thursday Mr. Rutherford would have wanted Webster to clean his apartment—he'd been doing it so long and knew just where everything belonged. They'd had their tiffs through the years, but the employer had always come to heel, which was wise because no one

but Webster would have worked for him two consecutive weeks.

Mr. Rutherford had not changed the locks. The reason Webster had been unable to open the door that morning was that, to use a euphemism, he had lost the key. Webster never lost anything, or broke anything, or got into the liquor. He was perfection itself. And yet the Rutherford key had vanished from its central position on Webster's key ring, the ring which held means of entry to Webster's own home as well as those of several of Mr. Rutherford's more intimate enemies.

The police, the newspaper account indicated, were not even aware that this *was* a murder. Mr. Rutherford having been found burned to a turn in a chair, the assumption was that he had fallen asleep while smoking a cigarette. It happens all the time, even to less dedicated toss pots than Mr. Rutherford had been. It had in fact, happened to that very gentleman twice in the past. Twice had the brandied been snatched from the burning.

Returning briefly to the putative soul, Webster hoped it was not now roasting in hell, so poignant had been its owner's fear of flame. After the two near things, faced with the need to give up liquor and/or tobacco, Mr. Rutherford had abandoned the latter. To insure himself against backsliding, he had submitted to hypnotic suggestion, which had embedded an allergy to even the aroma of the weed. Callers at his establishment were forbidden its use, and ash trays were purely ornamental. Further to allay his neurotic fears, walls, floors, all the furniture in the apartment had been fireproofed. Nevertheless, he had burned to death in a chair.

Obviously he had been murdered. And his key had been stolen from Webster's key ring.

It seemed reasonable to suppose that one of Webster's other clients was not only a thief but a murderer.

Webster Flagg, Negro, erstwhile actor, quondam singer, was now a day's worker by day and a man of property

by night. His flat, which he hired someone else to clean for him, was peppered with photographs of stage stars of the days when playwrights tended to run more heavily toward Negro butlers.

Belasco had taught him how to serve. Caruso, with whom he had become acquainted while singing in the chorus of *Aida*, had inducted him into the mysteries of fine Italian cookery, although Webster, a crowd pleaser, continued to prepare Southern fried chicken and chittlin's for those who expected it.

His third mentor, Experience, had taught him that unless a man of his race were among the top half dozen in the theater he might better build a hedge against the future. Therefore Webster had saved his money and invested it in annuities and gilt-edged securities, which yielded just too little to live on in the style he preferred. For cakes, and kicks, he played his old role for real five days a week, with sometimes a Webster benefit on Saturday or Sunday if one of his clients gave a party. What with wages, Christmas presents, and occasional favor curryings, it paid well.

Tall, with a stoop which had been part of his act for so long that it was now habit, he stood looking down at the four keys which yet remained on the ring. With long brown fingers he ticked off the first one and opened the door to his apartment. He found the light switch unerringly. He knew where the light switches were in the flats which the other keys opened, and in Mr. Rutherford's. He could turn much light on the subject, for he knew where a lot of things were in those apartments and within the hearts of their inhabitants. Things like hate, jealousy, meanness, and spite. Murdering things.

Tossing down the Thursday-evening newspaper which had informed him of Mr. Rutherford's passing, he crossed the room. He poured himself a glass of very dry sherry from the decanter which had been a duplicate wedding present of Mrs. Taylor's—Mrs. TUESDAY Taylor, who had reason enough to dislike Mr. THURSDAY Ruther-

ford. Priscilla Taylor—in the fastness of his own home Webster indulged in first names—had given him the gift last week, one of a series of little efforts to ingratiate herself with him. Priscilla wasn't really so bad, he supposed, but Webster had a deep-seated prejudice against her kind; she was that anathema, a bachelor's bride.

By instinct Webster was a gentleman's gentleman. As a rule, which had been constantly broken by Mortimer Rutherford, they were easier to please. At least they were decently at their work so he could do his in peace, not lolling around the house and getting in the way of the vacuum cleaner. Johnson Taylor and Bill Patterson had undeniably been Webster's favorite pair of bachelors until Priscilla butted in. Then the stench of orange blossoms had driven Bill Patterson into Mr. Rutherford's apartment, where he perched like a chronically unwelcome raven, and Webster's Tuesdays became less pleasant.

It wasn't women in general to whom Webster objected, but wives. In his book woman's place was not in the home. He was perfectly willing to work for Althea Tamblyn on Mondays *and* Fridays because she was a career girl who made herself properly scarce. He even felt her worthy of the title Bachelor Girl.

Hers was key number three, he thought, fingering it. Four belonged to Peters and Randall, the precarious holder of Wednesday, so transitory that Webster did not even know their first names, so elusive that he had not even seen them. Their sole contact had been through the written word, in most cases hastily scrawled on the back of a laundry list, apologizing for the number of soiled glasses or requesting that Webster bend every effort to get the lipstick off the sofa.

Lipstick on the sofa! It was more portentous than writing on the wall. That had been the first hint of the Priscilla thing. He sighed for the numbered days of Peters and Randall, and took a dim view of approaching Wednesdays.

He picked up the keys and put them in his pocket. The police would like to know, he thought, that Rutherford's was not among them. They would also be interested to learn that Rutherford's combustion had not been exactly spontaneous. Webster, however, had no intention of immediately supplying this information. It was foolish to stick out a neck the color of his, and his fingers were the wrong shade for pointing in accusation. He'd better amass a few facts before suggesting that the woodpile was not untenanted.

He picked up his wineglass and sat down to marshal them.

Priscilla Taylor jumped as the wedding-present clock struck seven. She had not glanced at it in fully twenty minutes, pretending ardently to herself that Johnson wasn't really late, was often later than this. But, factually, he hadn't been, not in the whole ten weeks they'd been married. Why, oh why, did he have to break his record tonight?

He didn't know, of course, how much she needed him. When she had got through with the police, about eleven forty-five that morning, she had telephoned his office. His secretary had said that Mr. Taylor had several calls to make, that he had a luncheon appointment, that she would ask him to phone Mrs. Taylor as soon as he returned. All this in the amused tone to which Priscilla was becoming loathingly accustomed. Why were brides considered funny? And why did she have to be the funniest kind of all, the five-feet-two, blond, and blue-eyed? When you really needed your husband they thought you just couldn't let him alone.

She had called the office again in the afternoon, forcing her hesitant finger to dial the number. No one answered. That was to be expected, she supposed. No worth-while work could have been accomplished that afternoon at Mortimer Rutherford Associates, Inc. Not after the police

dropped in to find out what to do with the boss's body.

Priscilla had herself referred them there. As far as she knew, Mortimer didn't have a single relative, but he had an office, where his lawyer's name would doubtlessly be known. He had a fine private office at the end of a long corridor off which jutted the little cubbyhole in which Johnson slaved in the wholly unfounded belief that he would someday be promoted. Look what had happened just recently when there had been a vacancy in the executive ranks. Had Johnson got the job which had been virtually promised to him? No. A stranger, a total stranger to the firm, had been given the nod and the big hello.

"My husband works in Mr. Rutherford's office." Had she said that to the police, with all the bitterness she could not erase from the phrase? She could not remember whether or not she had. But it didn't matter, did it? They thought that Mortimer Rutherford had died accidentally. They didn't know it was murder.

She took another tour around the room. I must get rid of that chair, she thought. Tonight. However much Althea Tamblyn likes it, I can't give it house room another minute.

I've never liked it. I don't really like any of the furniture in this apartment. Even if Althea *is* one of the most popular interior decorators in New York and was a great pet of Mr. Rutherford's, I don't see why I can't select my own stuff.

The chair for the moment seemed to symbolize all the unasked-for things in Priscilla's life, the major and minor irritations which were besetting her happiness with Johnson. She stood in front of it glowering, arms akimbo.

This was a twin to the chair in which Rutherford had perished. Its design had won a prize at the Museum of Modern Art. Upholstered, roomy, and comfortable, it was so light that a half-grown child could lift it with ease. Althea was so mad about it that she'd bought it for her own apartment, as well as for Rutherford's, the Taylors', and for the new neighbor, Dave Randall, whom Priscilla had not yet met. Lord knows how many other people she

had foisted it upon. When Althea took a fancy she usually had her way.

Rhythmically chanting the woman's name, Priscilla beat her fist upon the chair. "I hate her," she muttered aloud. Until these past few weeks she had never known what hatred was. She had experienced dislike in a mild sort of way, a purely negative emotion, not positive like the one which now racked her. As her capacity to love had grown in her close association with Johnson, so had its opposite, in exact ratio, until its heightened power almost frightened her. Hate like that was strong enough to kill by its own weight alone.

One breathed life into him one loved, shielded him, protected him, helped him to live. One wished death to one's enemies, who were also his even though he might be unaware of the fact—*especially* if he was unaware, if he trusted mistakenly. If you were the only wary one you had to hate enough for two, as Priscilla did. It was with such doubly distilled venom that she hated Althea, had hated Mortimer.

The hall door opened and she turned to run into her husband's arms. Something stood between them: Althea. Althea, as always.

She was half turned, finishing some comment to Johnson as he closed the door. Her black hair winged back from her white temple and Priscilla thought, there's a spot which my hate could wound and find vulnerable. She could see the outline of Althea's jugular vein in the white neck, and she willed it red and gaping. Then—surely intentionally—Althea turned her back upon Priscilla, who fixed upon a point between the shoulder blades.

Although she should have been as riven as St Sebastian, Althea remained intact. Belatedly she greeted her hostess, with marked condescension:

"Hi, little one. Had a long dull day?"

"Not exactly," Priscilla responded dryly.

She walked toward Johnson, who regarded her with that wonderment and disbelief he seemed to feel every

She stood woodenly, sullenly, for an instant, then she crumpled. She buried her head in Johnson's jacket and shed the tears she'd been storing all day.

From her sobs they sifted the news that Mortimer Rutherford was dead and Priscilla had found his body.

In neat, legible script, Webster was setting forth a few facts upon his desk at home, beginning with a sketch of the deceased:

"Mr. Rutherford was about fifty, had never married. I have worked for him nearly thirteen years, during which time I've seen lots of groups of friends come and go. Mr. Rutherford uses up his friends faster than any man I ever saw, like someone who's hard on shirts uses shirts.

"He asked a lot of his friends, but I don't think that's what wore them out as much as the favors he did them. He got the apartments for all these people I work for by the simple means of owning the pair of buildings. He got me to work for them, which was probably a two-way favor and par for the course. Still, I don't know. Maybe they would rather have lived somewheres else and hired their own houseworkers. But Mr. Rutherford wouldn't let them.

"He got Miss Althea decorating jobs, and those people got a hit-show decorator at Annie Oakley prices. Everybody should have been happy. In my opinion they weren't.

"He sure was keen on Miss Althea. I don't mean that way, although she's a mighty fine-looking woman. Mr. Rutherford never cared for anyone that way, to my knowledge that is. And in Miss Althea's case, I think I would know since I clean both their apartments Somehow I would have got wind of it, in one place or another. Besides, Althea was more Johnson Taylor's girl before he married Priscilla.

"Althea always was different from most of Mr. Rutherford's friends Usually he was like a big fading star who likes to surround himself with a company which makes

both handsome, slicked to a satin shininess, and, in motion, betraying kinship to panthers. In both cases you felt the world could go hang and these creatures still be able to manage.

The woman was the more gregarious of the two; Angus could take people or leave them alone. Strangely, or perhaps to be expected, the cat felt no love for his spiritual sister. Webster had seen tortuous scratches on Althea's arms, the results of getting too flip with Sir Angus.

The cat's yellow eyes brimmed with contempt for the human race, but his innate sensibility pointed the wisdom of making a few exceptions. He tolerated Webster, who fed him extra scraps on Thursdays. Sincerely or not, he professed to adore Mr. Rutherford. And that was why Webster had stopped writing to think about Angus.

"A watch cat," Mr. Rutherford had jokingly called him. "A fur-bound alarm, my ace in the hole. If all else fails me, Webster, if the fireproofing fizzles out, if I ever light a cigarette and fall asleep, Angus will warn me. Angus curls on my pillow, on my lap, watching over me so I can have pleasant, unsmoke-filled dreams. Don't you, Angus?"

And then the pudgy, gray-haired man with the pink-cheeked boy's face had bent over and tweaked the black cat's ear. Yellow eyes looked up, seeming to say, "Yea, verily, master," but Webster now wondered if they hadn't actually meant, "That's what you think, bub."

Johnson Taylor wiped his wife's eyes with his handkerchief. Althea watched him with a strange expression of envy, as if she too would like to weep uncontrollably but lacked the equipment.

"There he was." Priscilla choked out the words. "Nothing else in the room even singed. Just the chair, with Mortimer in it."

"Darling," Johnson said. "Don't."

Then she looked up at him and saw his stricken face and began to feel sorrier for him than for herself, for the

sympathy she was suffering him to bear. Gradually she checked her sobs, until presently she wasn't crying any more at all.

Johnson sat down on the curved sofa and took her on his knee. He was frowning "How did you happen to be in Mort's apartment, baby?" he asked.

"Bill asked me to feed the cat," she said, looking at him as though that explained everything. In a way it did. Bill had reason enough to resent her, apart from her having usurped his half of this apartment. Priscilla felt that Johnson's friends must like her or eventually Johnson might not like her, which would be a little worse than dying. If Bill had asked her to feed a lion she would have done so. Black Angus wasn't quite that bad.

"Bill's in Washington, isn't he?" Althea put in.

"Yes. That's why. I got a wire from him this morning saying that he had expected to be back last night but had been detained. He said since Mort was away too last night would I feed the cat."

"But the key, darling," Johnson said. "You can't send a key by telegraph "

"It was a pretty big telegram," she kidded, and smiled at him. Johnson grinned back, and she wondered why Althea didn't go away. Couldn't she see that Priscilla would be all right, could wipe away the memory of Mort's funeral pyre in a few minutes alone with her husband?

Whether through insentience or deliberate malice, Althea sat down and made herself at home. With a sigh, Priscilla resumed her story:

"Bill said, 'Emergency key under mat. Mort would die if he knew.' So I went——"

"It was there?" Johnson asked.

"Mort died, anyhow " Althea cracked through like the voice of doom She laced her strong fingers together and narrowed her eyes, saying, "I wonder what the world will be like without him," as if she were trying to picture it, to sketch in its detail as she would mentally furnish a room.

"There's one thing that won't be in it, for sure," Johnson said morosely. "To wit, a job for me."

"Not *that* job, maybe, and high time, too," Priscilla said loyally. "You were always much too good for it."

"Jobs don't grow on trees," he observed. "When a one-man agency like Rutherford's comes toppling down there's one hell of a lot of timber."

Althea spoke then in her man-to-man voice, shutting Priscilla out: "I wouldn't worry too soon. Mort was always saying he would will the firm to his employees."

"Yes, but when would he say that?" Johnson muttered darkly. "When he was drunk and sentimentally inclined. When he sobered up he forgot all about it. Besides, guys as afraid of death as he was rarely make wills. They'd rather pretend that there's no need, that they personally will live forever."

In the back of the apartment the buzzer sounded insistently. Reluctantly, Priscilla went to answer it.

These were old-fashioned, if chic, flats, with no doorman. A caller pushed a buzzer downstairs and you pressed a little red button which automatically opened the door for him. Priscilla held her finger firmly on the button when the sound came again. "Shave and a haircut, bay rum," it buzzed over and over until she longed to tear the bell box off the wall. Attached to it was a primitive intercommunication system by means of which one could converse with the person downstairs; she lifted this from its hook and shouted, "Yes, yes. Who is it?"

Mrs. Mueller, the janitor's wife, answered her patiently. "The dumb-waiter, Mrs. Taylor, not the door. Open up please. I have found something in the cellar and I think maybe you will take care of it. Yes?"

"Yes," said Priscilla, thinking wildly, now they are sending me other people's garbage. Everything happens to me.

She opened the door to the dumb-waiter shaft. It was dark inside, but not quiet. There was a swishing sound,

as of an infinitesimal whisk broom being wielded vigorously. In the dead center of the cave two golden lights flickered then rose straight up in space. Priscilla stepped back

Hobbled, with one paw drawn up beneath him, Black Angus none the less majestically stepped from the dumbwaiter onto the shelf which stood flush with it. He thudded to the floor and mewed in pain and self-pity.

"Angus!" she stammered, her customary fear of him having been bested. "Angus, you poor little thing."

The cat listened, and hesitated barely a fraction of a second. Having never mistaken the buttered side of his bread, he implicitly trusted his judgment. He looked up at her soulfully, arched his back, and rubbed against her shinbone.

He even bothered to recall how to purr.

2

ENTERING THE self-service elevator the next morning, Webster thought there was no incentive like curiosity to get one to work on time. He customarily arrived at Althea Tamblyn's a full hour later.

He got off at the sixth floor, where she lived, where they all lived. Mr. Rutherford had seen to that, had arranged to people the top floors of the adjoining buildings with his friends so that they had a virtual monopoly on the roofs. The roofs, technically, were public domain, and belonged as well to the residents of the five other floors, but Mr. Rutherford had so garnished them with his flower pots, his trellises, and some fancy lawn furniture bought by Miss Althea, as to make them seem his special preserve.

Not only did the roof tops provide a gull's eye view of one of the finer stretches of the East River and act as a catchall for breezes on these warm summer evenings, they

also served as short cuts. Mr. Rutherford and his dear, dear friends could call upon each other at whim without risking contamination in the elevators or on the public streets. Thus had the sixth floor become a sort of splendid isolation ward.

The southernmost apartment had been Mr. Rutherford's. Across the hall from it was Miss Althea's. Between them, a green-for-starboard stairway ran to the roof. Next door there was a red-for-port stairway between the Taylors' place (nestled against Miss Althea's) and the Peters-Randall flat. Mr. Rutherford had chosen the colors in deference to the same seafaring whimsy which had prompted him to call the renovated tenements S.S. Rutherford and to hoist a pennant on the roof, which he probably secretly regarded as the captain's bridge. If it wasn't for the continuing housing shortage and the desirability of this address, Webster reflected, a lot of people might overtly have resented Mr. Rutherford as a landlord.

As he entered Althea's apartment he could hear her talking on the telephone; obviously he had miscalculated the working hours of non-wage slaves. He stood by the door, putting on his deferential mien as he would put on grease paint.

Miss Althea was sure mad. She was bawling out somebody with that overemphasis which suggested that she was in the wrong and knew it, like the time she had forgotten to bring home furniture polish and lit into him for not using it. He eavesdropped shamelessly, sympathetically thinking that some other poor creature who worked for her was now getting her special brand of what-for.

"All right, all *right,*" she was saying. "How was I to know you weren't finished with it? It usually doesn't take you this long, and this one isn't very big. If you'd been available either here *or* in the country earlier this week I would have——"

The party at the other end could have said no more than five words before Althea seized the ball again.

"It's not my fault you didn't have enough," she said

truculently. "I ordered it last week. You know the old boy likes to take his time. Chances are it will be delivered to you today, and I'll get the other back to you tomorrow. If you work all week end it can still be ready by Monday. But the repair job must have priority. I want you to——"

The play was taken away from her again, but only briefly. In less than a minute she was saying:

"What do you mean I can get myself another boy? You're in this as deep as anybody, you know. If you don't watch your *ps* and *qs* I may just *let* you go back to art for art's sake. You won't starve. I hear the food's pretty good in jail."

She hung up without the formality of good-by and came into the living room, where Webster waited. As she walked she was putting on her suit jacket, tugging at the cuffs. Her alabaster skin was flushed, and she looked hot and mussy, more like a day's end than its beginning. She caught sight of Webster and tensed up like a horse refusing a fence The color drained from her cheeks.

"Webster!" she gasped. "I didn't expect——"

She crossed the room, picked up her pocketbook, dropping the gloves which had lain beneath it. Obsequiously, Webster retrieved and handed them to her. This near, he could see that the circles under her eyes were violet.

"I'm sort of ahead of myself this morning, ma'am," he said "There's a few little extras I want to do. Sorry if I scared you"

"You didn't scare me," she said absently.

Someone did, he thought. Or something. He stood back, regarding her critically. She was usually so crisp, so calm and assured in the role of Miss Althea Tamblyn; this morning she was going up in her lines like a stage-frightened understudy.

"Miss Althea"—he shook his head at her warningly—"that sure is a pretty suit you're wearing, but you're going to be sorry you wore it. It's fixing to be a mighty hot day outside."

Clients, especially female ones, liked you to fuss over

them, to be interested in their well-being. It even made the most emancipated woman feel like Uncle Tom's darling Little Eva.

"You do like I tell you and put on something fluffy," he cautioned.

"Thanks, Webster, but I'll be all right," she said, starting for the door. With her back to him she almost whispered, "Webster have you heard about Mr. Rutherford?"

To act or not to act, he pondered, and came to a quick decision.

"No ma'am," he said blandly. "I bet he sure is mad at me. I had the misery awful bad yesterday and didn't come to work for——"

Althea had turned around to face him. She was fully in command of herself now.

"Mr. Rutherford's not mad," she dead-panned, then pulled the yak, "He's dead."

It looked phoney to the critic who watched her. Rutherford had ostensibly been her friend, had certainly been her sponsor in a number of big decorating jobs. Tears might have been expected, at least a catch in the voice, but this cold control was out of line. Did it cloak a strong emotion, sorrow, or wholehearted approval of Rutherford's sudden passing? Webster could not venture to tell the emotions apart without a score card, an item which was not yet within his possession.

"Rest his soul," he said reverently. "How did the poor gentleman——"

"He was burned." Althea broke in as though she expected an argument. "Burned to death. The funeral's tomorrow morning at eleven. The Goodchild Chapel. I'm sure he would have wanted you to come."

"I'll be there, miss,"—he promised.

She nodded and was gone. Webster walked back to the kitchen to get his cleaning equipment and to see if there was any leftover coffee.

There was plenty, more than a cupful, and Miss Althea had barely touched her favorite brioches at breakfast that

morning. Webster also liked brioche; with extreme delicacy he cut away the corner at which she had nibbled and sat down to enjoy it.

Sipping his dividend of coffee he weighed the advisability of wangling an announcement of Mr. Rutherford's death from any of his other clients he might see that day. There was small chance that they would get together and compare notes later, and their reactions might be interesting to observe. Priscilla Taylor's, for instance. Would she attempt to mask the unalloyed joy she must feel at the deliverance?

Mr Rutherford had tried every which way to break up that Taylor marriage both before and after it happened. He'd gone to extents of rudeness quite incompatible with his tendency to charm. When Priscilla and Johnson were courting, Mr. Rutherford had given an extraordinary number of parties, to none of which had Priscilla been invited. Johnson Taylor attended, and made up the blushing half of touching little tableaux with his boss, wherein the older man stood with his hand on his employee's shoulder and told all and sundry that the firm had great hopes for the boy.

And what happened when Johnson himself gave a party during that same period? Priscilla was there, and Rutherford said that either he or she would have to leave as he was allergic to her perfume. As it turned out, neither of them had left Webster had fixed that by sponging off the offensive young lady with a cleaning fluid Rutherford found acceptable.

The marriage seemingly having been ordained in heaven, Mr. Rutherford's bad offices did not prevail, but Priscilla herself would have had to be an angel not to resent his wedding present. Of all the things a rich man might be able to bestow upon a striving young couple, of all things that Priscilla decidedly did not need, he chose an oil portrait of himself painted by a protégé of Miss Althea's There it hung, over what would have been a mantelpiece if Miss Althea had not considered such contrap-

tions middle-class and stupid. There, since that *was* her opinion, it hung above a hole in the wall, the extinct fireplace, which was all the fire-fearing Rutherford would permit his tenants.

The telephone rang and Webster rose to answer it.

Priscilla had also given some thought to Mortimer's portrait that morning. Sentiment was sentiment, and she supposed that Johnson would feel that the portrait should remain where it was out of respect for his departed boss, at least until the man was decently urned. Her own feeling was that she wanted it thence but fast.

And the chair, too. She had a ready excuse. Women were always giving their nerves as excuse for silly things they did or did not do, a prerogative which Priscilla seldom exercised. This time she had reason, *fortissimo,* to use it, for the chair and portrait combined to floodlight in her memory that picture, which she was endeavoring to erase, of the portrait's subject and a similar chair fused horribly together.

The artist, a remarkably facile young Frenchman Althea had picked up somewhere, had painted Mortimer in the manner of Rembrandt. His educated eye had x-rayed through to Mort's own idealized notion of himself, and the man he had put upon his canvas was benign, an open-handed dispenser of largess, a patron of the worthy needy. He had censored the sensual lips until they formed a mouth with character, and he had taken artistic license with the weak chin. The eyes, however, were the feature on which he had lavished the most flattery; they glowed with a lambent light achieved in life by Mortimer only after the third brandy, and then only briefly.

Now Mort was dead and his glamorized eyes stared down at Priscilla, followed her about the room. "I was a kindly soul," they seemed to say. "Why would anyone kill me?"

There's plenty reason, you old —— she thought, using

a word she would never have uttered aloud. She lifted the lid of the record player and started a stack of records which the living Rutherford would have loathed. Jazz it was, good earthy, marching-music jazz. He had winced at anything more rowdy than Chopin, but his image continued to beam upon Priscilla with infinite kindness. Impulsively she took the portrait from its hook and leaned it against the wall, face inward.

Where it had hung was a rectangle fully two shades lighter than the gray which surrounded it. She would have to find a substitute to cover this unsightly pallor, and she thought of the small, choice Cézanne Johnson had bought her yesterday.

It was *too* small, of course, but it occurred to her that it might be pieced out to fit the portrait frame by the addition of a mat. She put the two pictures aside, resolving to take them to the framer's that afternoon.

That left only the problem of the chair; in what she considered to be a flash of brilliance she solved it. She could dispose of it easily, as soon as she finished her morning chores, and simultaneously be doing her good deed for the day.

With two salient reminders of Mortimer virtually on their way out, she began to feel better. She turned up the volume of the record player and went into the kitchen. Black Angus, who had staked out a claim in front of the refrigerator, raised his head in greeting. Boldly, and with no ill results, she tickled his throat.

3

"THIS IS Miss Tamblyn's residence," Webster said into the telephone.

"Is that you, Webster?" Bill Patterson's voice, which went on to identify itself unnecessarily.

"Miss Tamblyn isn't home, sir." Not "suh." Webster didn't feel required to lay it on quite that thick in his role of old family retainer. "She left for her office about a quarter of an hour ago."

"Thanks. I'll call her there. But don't hang up. I want to speak to you too, Webster."

Webster's clients had memorized his schedule and often got in touch with him in this fashion, so he was not surprised. "Yes, sir," he said alertly.

"I just got back from Washington. I read the terrible news." No traps for Patterson, Webster noted. "I haven't been to the apartment yet. Do you think it's badly mussed up?"

"I don't know, Mr. Bill. The papers said only the chair was burned. And Mr. Rutherford, of course."

"Well, give it a look-see, will you? Don't bother about my room, but if the rest is all right I think a few of us could stand a little cheering up this evening. Are you free tonight?" The voice stopped and Webster heard Bill's doomed-to-failure attempt at a chuckle. Mr. Patterson sure worked hard at being the genial liquor salesman, but he was badly type-cast. He was no Happiness Boy, that one.

"I don't mean really free, Webster," he quipped lamely. "I'll pay your usual rates. But if you're available I'd like you to order supper for four, and something for yourself, naturally. Can you do it?"

"Yes, sir, I can do it all right, but there's just one thing. I didn't bring the key to Mr. Rutherford's apartment with me today," he prevaricated.

"What? Oh. Well, ask the janitor's wife to let you in."

"Mr. Patterson, you know Mrs. Mueller and I don't get along."

Everybody Webster worked for in these apartments knew that. It was a long-standing feud dating back to an argument about his alleged overloading of the dumb-waiter. With great dignity Webster now toted his trash down in the elevator, and had no further truck with Mrs.

Mueller. That was why he had not asked her to open the door for him yesterday and had gone to the Dodgers' game when he discovered the key was missing.

Patterson muttered a mild oath and acknowledged that he had momentarily forgotten the hostilities, adding, "Guess I'll have to grab a cab and bring you the key."

"Guess you'll have to if you want me to fix up the place," Webster grumbled. "I don't know what Miss Althea will say at taking her time."

"I'll fix it with Miss Althea." Bill sounded assured. "I'm inviting her tonight, anyhow. See you soon."

He rang off. Dexterously, with an index finger, Webster cleaned out the telephone's cradle before replacing the instrument therein. Miss Althea and all those fancy modern decorators talked about dust catchers. If anything could catch more dust than a dial telephone, he'd eat his grandmother's bric-a-brac.

The coffee was cold when he got back to it, and he wasn't sufficiently interested to heat it again. He dribbled it down the sink. Into the garbage pail went the uneaten half of the second brioche. He had lost his appetite.

To his mind, it beat all. Mr. Patterson was so pleased to have the apartment to himself that he couldn't even wait until after its proper owner's funeral to have a ball. Inviting Miss Althea, who had always been more Rutherford's friend than his, to dinner, and Lord knows who else! Webster had seen Billy goats with better manners than that.

He got his cleaning gear and went into the bedroom. Across the air shaft he could hear the wild squeal of Mr. Sydney Bechet's soprano saxophone from the Taylors' place, playing "Muskrat Ramble" straight down Rampart Street. Whatever else you might say about Priscilla Taylor, she had lovely taste in music. In perfect time, he started stripping the linen off Miss Althea's bed.

He missed a beat, then two.

He'd made this bed up fresh on Monday, using the turquoise sheets. The turquoise sheets were still there all

right, but not the pillow slip which had matched them. This slip was yellow. Miss Althea, who rarely raised a finger around the house except in self-defense, had changed her own pillowcase at some point during the last five days.

Fewer days than that, because the yellow slip had obviously been used at least one night. He went into the bathroom, opened the laundry hamper, and found the banished turquoise.

It was marble-streaked, undoubtedly with blood.

Miss Althea was too sound-looking to be a sufferer from nose bleeds. In fact, the only other time he'd found a slip in such condition in her house had been after a battle in which Black Angus was the victor. Further, he recalled that Miss Althea, usually quite willing to expose her handsome arms and shoulders, weather permitting, had worn a long-sleeved jacket this muggy morning.

He put the soiled pillowcase in a paper bag and tucked it into a corner of the closet he used for his things. It just might be important.

Half an hour later the buzzer sounded. Webster pushed the button in reply then left the apartment to wait by the elevator door, thinking it would open to reveal Bill Patterson. Instead, it revealed an undersized and obviously anxious delivery boy.

"It rattles," the youngster said, holding out what appeared to be a shoe box. "Are you Miss Tamblyn?"

"What a question!" Webster said crossly.

"I mean——"

"I know what you mean. Yes. I'm Miss Tamblyn's butler. But we don't accept broken merchandise. Let's see it."

Unless Cinderella slippers were now high fashion this was no shoe box. The paper which enclosed it was lavishly pasted with labels reading: GLASS, FRAGILE, and HANDLE WITH CARE. The delivery boy must be illiterate not to have been impressed by them.

He shoved a receipt and a pencil toward Webster, who

said, "Not so fast, sonny. We'd just better look and see what shape this stuff's in before we accept it."

Gingerly, he opened the package. It contained numerous small glass jars, one of which had shattered and flooded the box with its contents, which was sticky, smelly, and bright, bright pink. Paint, Webster guessed.

"Better take this back where it came from, buddy," he said, trying to press the untidy parcel into the other's hands.

"Aw, please." The boy resisted. "It came from some place the hellangone in Brooklyn. The fellow who called into the delivery service where I work made out like it was right near the subway, but which subway, fa gosh sake? Then the guy I was supposed to deliver it to refused it and told me to bring it here. And now you want to send me all the way back with it. It would finish my day, believe me. Be a sport and take the package, will ya?"

Webster hesitated. The boy was grimy and stupid, but he probably had a widowed mother to whom he took home part of his pay, or maybe a poolroom was partially dependent upon his earnings. Webster was a sentimentalist, prone to exaggeration and his compassion was easily had. He'd hate to cause this boy to lose his job, thus becoming an accessory before juvenile delinquency.

"Wait a minute," he said gruffly. "We'll call Miss Tamblyn at her office and see what she says to do."

Taking no chances, he hauled the boy to the phone with him, dialed the number with his free hand. Althea's secretary put him right through to the boss. He heard her say, "Hello," and he launched into his story:

"Some paint just came for you, Miss Althea. One of the jars is broken and——"

"Paint?" she shrilled, in what seemed to be panic.

"Yes, miss. It came from someplace in Brooklyn. The boy says he delivered it first to someone in Manhattan who wouldn't take it, and I don't think we should either."

"I didn't think he'd have the nerve!" she said explosively. Intuitively he sensed that she was harking back to

that earlier phone call he had overheard. "I'll fix his wagon, the son of a——"

She didn't finish the phrase, nor did she say anything else for some time. In fact, the silence on the phone became so protracted that Webster thought something must have gone wrong with the switchboard.

"Miss Althea?" he said tentatively.

And then she spoke, at a high pitch close to hysteria: "Webster, how dare you open my things?"

"I been trying to tell you, miss, something was broken inside."

"Well, you should have minded your own business. You have no right to open packages unless I explicitly tell you to do so. I'm entitled to some privacy. It might have been anything."

The injustice of her attitude sent Webster's blood pressure soaring. Althea's maidenly reticence about her personal belongings was so minute that there existed no scale sensitive enough to weigh it. Through the years, rinsing out a few things at her request, he had become as intimate with her intimate possessions as a ladies' maid.

"I ought to fire you," she went on, and he thought, Oh, Oh! Here it began again, another one of the series of clashes between them which had assumed a classic pattern. Webster uttered his traditional line stonily: "You don't have to fire me. I quit."

Althea had a few more words to say then. She always did. Inevitably she would have to eat them all later, when she calmed down, and it aggravated him to see her taking such a large helping for herself. She was so totally in the wrong this time, and the bigger the battle the longer he'd have to play hard to get when she begged him to change his mind.

In his preoccupation he had loosed his hold upon the boy who, knowing an advantage when he saw one, cut and ran. Webster said, "Oh," in exasperation, and thought of the most fitting thing he could do to Miss Althea; deftly, he hung up the phone while she was still talking.

He ran after the boy, but the elevator door was sliding shut as he caught sight of it. The box of paint jars remained in the apartment, on a chest of drawers in the foyer. Webster angrily pushed it with the flat of his hand as he went into the kitchen to respond to the buzzer.

This time it was Bill Patterson.

Bill was wearing what Webster could describe only as a lugubrious suit. He wasn't in mourning for Mortimer Rutherford. He always dressed this way, a fact which seemed particularly irksome to Webster since Bill was his only client whose build approximated his own. Dark, somber, completely unimaginative, the clothes looked like hand-me-downs when new, and by the time Mr. Patterson got through worrying around in them Webster would not have worn them to a dog fight.

Mr. Patterson would have been a good-looking man if it hadn't been for all that worrying, which creased his face as it did his suits. He never expected anything to come out right, and invariably chose to do things which didn't even have a fifty-fifty chance, like moving into Rutherford's apartment when Johnson Taylor got married instead of trying to find a more suitable place for himself, like accepting that job in the liquor business. A successful liquor salesman has got to drink with his customers just to prove that the stuff isn't poison; Patterson had been known to pass out on a two-to-one martini.

He took what was dished out, without asking to see the menu. He was victimized by his haberdasher and by fate, but he never complained. That was what had made him so pleasant to work for when he lived with Taylor. In Rutherford's place he had no say whatsoever, or had not had until this minute.

His hand on the helm was not yet steady. "Order anything you feel like cooking for dinner," he said. "Steak. Chops Chicken, perhaps." Mr. Rutherford had planned his dinners down to the last poppy seed. Thursdays, if

Mr. Patterson lingered on there alone, had lost much of their gastronomic appeal.

"Get whatever you think we should have to go with it. I think they know me at the store"—he did not sound quite sure—"and will let you charge it. I've never had an account in my name."

"They know *me.*" Webster dismissed the possibility that credit could not be established.

"Well, good. Here's the key."

He reached across the chest of drawers to hand it to Webster. Anyone else's sleeve would have skimmed over the top of the paintbox, but not Patterson's; with his talent for calamity, he dunked right into it.

Webster lit the lamp which illuminated the foyer and Mr. Patterson's besmeared cuff. He clucked like a mother hen who has been pushed too far.

"Mr. Patterson, you're going to have to change that suit," he scolded. "I'll try to get that stuff off for you with turpentine, though the Lord knows how I'll find time to do it with all the things I got to do today."

Bill Patterson was staring down into the paintbox, his eyes kind of sick-looking. "What is that?" he asked, in a whisper.

"Just paint. It came for Miss Tamblyn. She's mad at me for opening it, but it wasn't my fault. I never heard her make such a fuss."

Patterson really looked throwing-up sick. The paint smell, Webster guessed. But, if it was that, why didn't he move away from the box instead of hanging over it like a horse over its feed bag?

"It's a mistake," he grated out. "The package was meant for me. That's why she was angry at you for opening it She didn't order it I'll take it over to my place.

"Look, Webster"—he paused in the hall—"will you just not say anything about this to anyone? I mean don't mention the paint, or Althea's behavior about it, or anything."

"Of course I won't, if you tell me not to. I wouldn't, anyway." He bridled at this challenge of his professional integrity. "I know how to keep my mouth shut."

Patterson had dragged his attention away from the box and was now concentrating upon his ruined cuff.

"Don't bother trying to clean it," he said at last. "It's an old suit, anyhow." It wasn't. Webster had himself transferred this particular dog from a store box to a hanger less than two months before. "Why don't you take it home with you?" Bill urged in a burst of eager generosity. "I'll leave it in your closet."

Webster nodded. There was a mission near his flat which had beneficiaries with taste no better than Mr. Patterson's.

He watched Patterson let himself into his apartment, heard him mutter that he would leave the key in the lock. Then, prodigiously, he set about his own much-interrupted work.

Never in his born days, he reflected, had he seen two grown people get so het up over a teeninechee li'l ole paintbox no bigger than a kid's.

Webster heard Bill Patterson leave as he finished giving the living room a lick and a promise. The surfaces, at least, were clean, and he had lifted all crucial cushions to retrieve the plastic side combs Miss Althea lost like petals. Like her spirit, Miss Althea's hair was unruly and rebellious of restraint.

He dawdled over the stowing of the cleaning gear lest Patterson returned on some stray second thought, but he was brimming with eagerness to get inside the Rutherford place for a little investigating. This was indeed a break, having the scene of the crime so readily opened to him.

When enough time had elapsed for Patterson to be a third of the way downtown Webster crossed the common hallway. The Rutherford door was ajar, the key remaining in the lock as Patterson had promised. Webster removed it and, as was his habit, placed it upon the nearest

piece of furniture within the vestibule. It was a habit, he thought sternly as he locked the door and put the key in his pocket, of which he must shed himself, along with another idiosyncracy of leaving the hall door unlatched while he worked. It had been his wont to set a scrap basket outside the door in which to toss old newspapers and similar rubbish as he came across them, and he liked to be able to go in and out without monkeying with locks. But in the future he'd just have to take that extra trouble because the pattern, familiar to all his clients, must have helped one of them to remove Rutherford's key from the ring. It had been easy for that one to judge, by the sound of the vacuum cleaner, when Webster was safely in the back of the apartment.

Once within the foyer Webster felt a squeamishness about venturing further into the apartment, almost as though that old chestnut about the Negro's fear of hants held a particle of truth. But this wasn't simply Death. This was Murder, which was a horse of a different handicap and had nothing to do with color.

Stifling his qualms, Webster strode into the room. There was something uncanny about its waxen perfection. It wasn't exactly clean, of course. There was a good quarter inch of cindery dust over everything (Mr. Rutherford, I presume. The thought came unbidden to his mind), but aside from that the shockingly empty space where the master's chair once stood, it was as it always had been.

This seemed not quite seemly to Webster, but it testified to the efficacy of the fireproofing material which had been used. That portion of the rug upon which the chair had rested was not even scorched, nor was the adjacent mahogany table upon which rested an empty brandy inhaler of the sort which had been its owner's constant companion and comfort. He banished the mental image of his late employer enveloped in blue flame like a monster Christmas pudding.

Mr. Rutherford, had he been in any position to do so, would have chortled at the adequacy of his protection.

Mr. Patterson, also, for once in his calamitous life, had reason to be pleased with himself, for it was he who had recommended the fluid used for fireproofing.

Back when Bill Patterson was learning the liquor business from the vats up he had run across an aged chemist who was a minor wizard. The man was a glutton for test tubes, and since he did not get his fill of them during working hours was constantly conducting a series of experiments in his home. He and Patterson, neither of them the type to appeal to most of the men around the plant, became extremely chummy, and when he happened to mention a fireproofing liquid upon which he was working Bill brought him over to meet Rutherford.

Webster supposed the old codger had thought his fortune made when Rutherford offered his apartment as proving grounds for the product and negotiated a contract giving himself exclusive rights to the formula. But things had never progressed beyond that point. The cash to make the stuff in quantity, to finance the necessary promotion, had never come closer than the carrot dangled before a plodding donkey's nose.

Rutherford had been like that. "Capricious" was the word. He did favors and made investments with what seemed to be total indiscrimination. He had been like a greedy boy sticking his fingers into all available pies. Well, pies were numberless, but one had just so many fingers. Now and then the most luscious coconut custard was bound to go untouched.

And it was too late now, as far as the fireproofing liquid was concerned. Mr. Rutherford's testimonial, in view of what had happened to him, would be something less than compelling. People would surely wonder what had gone wrong with the chair. Besides, the chemist would long since have starved to death in his laboratory—unless he had managed to invent an efficient food substitute—if he had not happened to have a granddaughter.

Her name was Priscilla. Miss Priscilla Hartman, as was, now Mrs. Johnson (Tuesday) Taylor.

Webster wondered, as he had often done before, how near she had actually come to being Mrs. William Patterson. Was there a time when Bill had a clear field, back in the days before he brought her west of Brooklyn, when they first met in the house near Sheepshead Bay which she shared with her grandfather?

Bill should have let well enough alone. It must have been pleasant enough for anyone, according to the snapshots which began to sprout around the mirror of Bill's chiffonier. Priscilla sitting in front of an open fire with a lap full of kittens. Priscilla proudly displaying a fish she had caught, the afternoon sun's slanting rays shining through her hair. Priscilla planting roses in her garden. Priscilla pictured doing some new thing every Tuesday, so that the number of photographs became great enough to interfere with dusting and Webster left a tart note suggesting that Mr. Patterson buy himself an album.

And then came the switcharoo, which anyone but Bill would have foreseen and managed to avoid. He invited Priscilla to a cocktail party Johnson was giving at their apartment, and from then on things moved swiftly, but not in Bill's direction.

The snapshots were put away, and Bill's room temporarily became monastically neat because he was in it so seldom. He'd been transferred to a selling job which kept him on the road. Webster did not know if Bill had made the change intentionally to remove himself from the scene of his unhappiness, or if it had been wished upon him by the evil fates that dogged him, but it gave Johnson Taylor plenty of opportunity to get Priscilla's lipstick on the sofa. In no time at all there was a silver-framed studio portrait of Priscilla on Johnson's dresser.

Then the engagement, and then the wedding, the reception held in this very room, at which Webster had served. Rutherford, despite his evident opposition to the match, had insisted upon acting like the father of the bride when the great day came. To those who did not know him well, this must have appeared to be the ultimate in good sports-

manship; those who were hip to Mr. R.'s tricks knew it was the water cure at sub-zero temperature.

Priscilla was frozen out of her own wedding, and the smile she forced was colder than the caviar, the countless cases of champagne, the molded ices. The room was full of flowers—arranged, as a final turn of the screw, by Althea—and of people who were not her friends but Rutherford's. Outside of her husband, the only person present who cared whether she was there or not was the gentle little old man in pepper-and-salt tweed. The grandfather. The brilliant scientist, whose mind held the secret of how to defeat fire but whose pocketbook was empty.

Priscilla had little reason to mourn Mortimer Rutherford.

4

THE CURTAIN which separated the long living room into two compartments slid back upon its trolley. The cindery dust had not penetrated back here, which denoted that the curtain must have been closed at the time of the burning. Webster wondered why. When Mr. Rutherford took his ease in his easy chair he had liked to be able to see all his Things, and the more important, the most expensive Things were in this far section of the room. Here hung, to quote its possessor, one of the truly fine private collections of modern art. Hence the curtain. Certain persons, although worthy of Rutherford's hospitality, were deemed unfit to gaze upon the collection—the sort of person, for instance, who didn't know a Matisse from a mattress and thought his four-year-old son surpassed Picasso. To forestall distressing comments, Rutherford had customarily drawn the curtain when such a one visited him. Such a one, Webster deduced, had done the gentleman in.

Did that narrow the field? Not appreciably. Althea Tam-

blyn appeared to be the only one of the suspects who was as real gone on art as Rutherford. Bill Patterson could take it or leave it alone. Furthermore, he was around the place too much for any attempt at censorship to be practicable. Johnson Taylor, on the other hand, was sort of an apprentice connoisseur, was already modestly contemplating a collection of his own, and it behooved Webster not to say whether this was merely an effort to butter up the old man At any rate, Johnson was too civil, as well as servile, ever to make a crack about his mentor's taste.

His wife, Priscilla, on the other hand, was strictly a Currier and Ives girl. *There* was a possibility. Considering Rutherford's over-all opinion of her, she might have seemed just the swine not to cast pearls in front of.

Peters and Randall, the imponderables, remained exactly that. Webster decided to make a tour of their flat that afternoon, at his leisure. Maybe, he thought eagerly, he might even get a peek inside that closet which was locked on Wednesdays.

First he would order the food for Mr. Patterson's dinner party. He planned to extend himself and Mr. Patterson's bank roll; since it was Friday there would be lobsters in the market, and Webster was in a mood for thermidor. Mr. Rutherford's files held an excellent recipe. He went to the kitchen to peruse it and check supplies.

The kitchen was a sight. The door to the dumb-waiter shaft was open; Webster shut it as tight as its chronically warped condition would allow. There were dirty dishes about, an empty bottle on the floor, used pans on the stove. Angus's pottery bowl held scraps which looked to be two days old, and the milk in the saucer beside it was rankly sour.

He worried again about the cat, wondering where it had gone He could not believe that it had perished like a faithful Hindu wife in the flames which had consumed its putative lord and master. Angus wasn't that sentimental. He was a cat of character, set in his ways, of which he had manv. One was a fondness for leaving scraps in his bowl

for nocturnal nibbling. What had prevented him from returning to these, which Webster was now emptying into an unfolded newspaper?

He flushed the milk down the drain, then took the recipe file from a shelf. With a pang of nostalgia he observed that a pair of Mr. Rutherford's reading glasses lay beside it. Mr. Rutherford had been such a vain man. He couldn't see worth a darn without his glasses, but pride had prevented his wearing them for anything but telephone and cookbooks. He had, in fact, called many wrong numbers and frequently misread fractions of cupfuls before he gave in even to that extent.

Webster was roughly estimating the supply of dry mustard on hand when the flesh at the back of his neck began to prickle. He stood stiffly, listening, and heard it again —a sound in the living room.

A light step on the creaky board which complained at the vaguest pressure. This time it gave no more than a whimper. Even Mr. Rutherford's debatable ghost, considering its former housing, could not possibly have walked so lightly.

Webster had locked the door. The key Mr. Patterson had given him was in his pocket. Someone had used another key to enter. The only other key Webster could call to mind at this minute was the one which had been stolen from his ring, the one, presumably, used by the murderer. He picked up the most formidable thing at hand, a wooden ice crusher, and went to investigate.

The first thing he saw as he entered the living room froze him to the floor. It was the chair, intact, blandly sitting where Mr. Rutherford had always sat in it.

Instinctively he raced toward the door to overtake the self-effacing furniture mover. It was dark in the foyer and he collided with something, something small, childishly so. He heard a sharp gasp of alarm or dismay.

"I'm armed," he warned melodramatically, and brandished the mallet.

"Why, Webster"—Priscilla Taylor's voice out of the dark, innocent, almost piping—"you nearly knocked me down."

She stepped into the light and her face was innocent too, her eyes blue as a kitten's and as disarming. Webster strenuously resisted their guile.

"I didn't expect to find you here today," she said. "It isn't Thursday."

"No, ma'am, it isn't," he agreed.

Of that much, at least, he was sure.

Once, years before, an actor had missed his cue in a scene with Webster. There had ensued two minutes and fifty seconds of stifling silence on stage before the prompter had been able to get through with the line.

Today there was no prompter, merely an uncomfortable Webster and a poised Little Miss Blue-Eyes who certainly didn't look as if she had been up to anything funny nor seem aware that an explanation was in order.

"I'm sorry you didn't know I was here, Miz Taylor," he angled. "You could have asked me to tote that chair for you."

"It was easy," she told him. "No trouble at all, really."

He knew that. He had histed those chairs often enough when he cleaned to know how little they weighed. Mrs. Taylor could have carried two handily. Or the same one twice, any number of times. She could have exchanged Mr. Rutherford's fireproof chair for a deadlier member of the species without disturbing her pulse rate or disarranging her hair-do.

There were two basic rules to follow when one embarked upon detection: Find the woman, and the weapon. It occurred to Webster that perhaps both had tumbled into his hands. There had been two weapons in this murder, one the element fire, which had burned itself out and surely consumed its origin. True, it had also consumed the second weapon, an inflammable chair, but that second

weapon had a tattletale twin. If one found the mate, it was fair to assume that one had also found the murderer.

And what would a smart murderer do with this thing which presented a constant threat of betrayal? He, or she, would ditch it of course, which was precisely the act in which Webster had caught Priscilla red-handed, providing this was the fireproof chair. Webster resolved to check on that feature at the first available moment. Meanwhile he regarded Priscilla as definitely under suspicion.

Some of his hostility leaked into his eyes. Priscilla could not fail to see that something was wrong and she chose the only method she could think of to remedy the situation.

"I'd like you to do a little extra work for me this afternoon," she bribed. "I have to go out. If you've got any time——"

He sighed deeply. "Time is what I'm just fresh out of," he said, adding, to show that he saw through her ruse, "You don't need me anyway, ma'am. Since you moved into Mr. Taylor's apartment, dusting and tidying all the time, there's not enough work over there to keep a bird alive."

Priscilla nervously twisted her flagrantly new wedding ring "You don't like me, Webster, do you?" she said at last.

He was unprepared for that. "I like you all right, ma'am," he faltered.

"No, you don't," she contradicted. "You've been prejudiced against me. I should think you'd know enough about the awfulness of prejudice to resist it" She glared around the room. "I bet *he* made you not like me," she said, and Webster knew whom she meant.

Her small face, usually candy-sweet, was contorted with hatred.

"It served him right to die." She pronounced her judgment. "Always controlling other people's lives, but when it came right down to it he couldn't control his own. I don't know what you really thought of him, Webster, but

I think Mr. Rutherford was evil. I think that hell-fire finally caught up with him."

Webster regarded her coolly. "Are you referring," he asked, "to that old-time religion?" His voice took on the rhythm of the familiar spiritual. "It ain't good enough for me, ma'am," he paraphrased.

"What do you mean?" The blue eyes narrowed warily.

"I mean I don't think the Lawd, in this case, punished Mr. Rutherford for his sins—without a little human assistance, that is."

"Oh?" She caught her lower lip with white teeth. "You mean you thing he was *murdered?*" she squeaked.

It was the feeblest reading of the line he could imagine.

"Indeed I do, ma'am," he said flatly. "What's more, I think you do too, all of you friends of Mr. Rutherford's. You all know how frightened he was of fire, what awesome respect he held it in. Do you think it likely that he'd go fooling around with matches his own self?"

"The idea of murder did occur to me"—she was speaking carefully—"but I dismissed it as ridiculous because no one else—the police or anyone didn't seem to think it was anything but an accident."

"The police didn't know about the fireproof chair," he pointed out, "else they would have gone looking for it in someone else's apartment."

"That's true," she said tensely. She chewed her lip again, this time sharply enough to endanger the delicate fabric of which it was made. "I'd forgotten that all those chairs weren't fireproof."

"All of them?" His eyebrows rose. "Only one of them was, Miz Taylor."

"No." She frowned in concentration. "Something happened. I can't remember what. Miss Tamblyn rarely makes a mistake"—the tone was bitter—"but this chair thing got all mixed up. Her assistant sent two of them, or maybe three, to be treated instead of just one. Or maybe all——"

"Not all, ma'am." Webster drew the line. "There must

have been at least one that was flame-hungry, that looked just like the others, or Mr. Rutherford would never have sat himself down in it."

He judged she was lying, was frantically squirming her way out of a trap, the existence of which she had not foreseen. What appeared to be a good head on her shoulders might have heretofore been barren of the thought that possession of the sole fireproof chair would be incriminating. By trumping up a story that an indeterminate number of such chairs existed she hoped to muddy the issue.

It was Priscilla's tough luck, he reflected, that had placed him in Mr. Rutherford's apartment on a day which was not a Thursday. Had he not been there to intercept her, she might somehow have got away with it. With his innate sympathy for underdogs he began to feel a little sorry for her, but he rapidly steeled his defenses against this.

"How did you get in here, Miz Taylor?" he asked craftily. "Did I leave the door unlocked?"

"No," she said absently. "I had a key."

Candy from a baby, he thought. Or, more accurately, candor from a baby. He felt vaguely uncomfortable, like a conscience-ridden spider whose parlorward invitation has been too readily accepted by an overly trusting fly. He preferred a little less give in his adversaries.

"You got a key to Mr. Rutherford's place?" he grilled half-heartedly.

Then she told him about the telegram she had received Thursday morning from Bill Patterson asking her to feed the cat.

"I came right over," she concluded, "but I didn't find Angus. I found Mr. Rutherford's body instead."

She shivered, and Webster clucked condolingly. The newspaper account had merely stated that a "neighbor" had made the discovery, had not revealed that neighbor's youth and vulnerability.

"You can't imagine how awful it was." Her eyes brooded on the memory of it. "That's why I couldn't bear to

have a chair like the one I found him in, in my own home. I had to get rid of it somehow. I thought Bill could use it in place of the one that burned, and since I still had the key . . ."

The sentence trailed off, and Webster welcomed the opportunity to think about that key. If Bill had wired her to use it in order to feed Angus, he must have known that it was in her possession. Why, then, had he not suggested Webster's obtaining it this morning, instead of making the round trip from downtown to give him another?

"Imagine!" she exclaimed. "Bill's wire told me the key was under the mat. I was so shocked that I vowed to give him a piece of my mind when I see him. It's practically inviting any casual prowler to come in and steal a picture."

"Mr. Patterson always kept a spare key under the mat when he lived over at your place." Webster was thinking out loud. It was in character; Patterson was an inveterate key loser. Priscilla Taylor must often have heard him being ribbed about it, which would make construction of this particular fib, if fib it was, easy. If it were truth, Patterson could be expected to deny it. He would hate to admit that he had been so shoeless with his patron's valued collection.

"Maybe that's just what happened," Priscilla continued breathlessly. "There've been lots of robberies in this neighborhood, you know. Maybe some hoodlum was burglarizing the place when he was surprised by Mr. Rutherford. There was a scuffle, and Mr. Rutherford got killed——"

"And the thief set fire to him in a nonfireproof chair he just happened to have handy," Webster finished for her. "Who'd believe that, I ask you?"

She frowned, then giggled hysterically. "You don't suppose Mr. Rutherford got the only chair that hadn't been fireproofed?" she suggested.

Webster wasn't buying. "No, ma'am, I do not," he said soberingly. "The long arm of coincidence would sure have to reach for that one."

She looked like a defenseless child when she pursed

the pink mouth; the heavy character Webster had assumed very nearly took a dive.

"Well"—she brightened—"the shops all over town are full of chairs like that. Anyone, not just someone living in these apartments, could have made the switch, after he'd killed Mr. Rutherford."

"In the middle of the night?" Webster asked dubiously, simultaneously realizing that the deed need not have been done at such an inconvenient hour. So far he had heard no mention of when his late employer had last been seen alive.

Priscilla was dreaming up her story, moving about the room, acting it out. "The thief," she said, "knew the neighborhood and the people who live in it well. He knew about the paintings, and that Mr. Rutherford was going to be out of town. He planned to be, you know."

"Mr. Rutherford was going away?" Webster gasped.

"Why, yes. Didn't you know?"

He hadn't known, and disbelieved it. However, he let it ride for the time being and permitted her to continue:

"So the thief came in, expecting to have all the time in the world, and found his plans spoiled because Rutherford was still here. It couldn't have been much of a fight. Mortimer was awfully drunk Wednesday night. As drunk as I've ever seen him."

"You saw him Wednesday night, ma'am?" He pounced on the statement. "What time was that?"

"Early," she said, backing away from him. "Before he went away. Or before he didn't go."

The wedding ring was whirling around her finger at an alarming rate, but Mrs. Taylor did not look like a married woman. She had, indeed, lost every semblance of maturity. Mrs. Johnson Taylor was a scared little girl expecting a wallop; her eyes darted about as if seeking a corner in which to hide.

"Miz Taylor," Webster advised her sadly, "you better grow up some. This here's a murder that we're in. You know it, and I know it, and whoever did it knows it. Other

folks may already know it, and some may begin to suspect before long. You better start learning to think before you speak.

"If you hadn't let slip that he was awful drunk Wednesday night I'd have had no way of knowing just when the murder took place. Might have been any time all week, save for that. True, the body was found on Thursday, but that don't say it was fresh. With a burning it's hard to tell, I expect. But you've about narrowed down the time element."

"I know I have," she cried. Then, as if she had grown tired of waiting for the punishment she knew she deserved, she struck a palm against the opposite fist. "I'm stupid, incompetent, hopeless"—each adjective was underlined by a strike—"and of no help to anyone whatsoever. Why don't you say so?"

"It isn't my place to say so, ma'am," he said stiffly.

"Oh, forget your old place," she said crossly. "You're really an awful snob, Webster. Can't you see that I need a friend, not a servant?"

Her eyes glistened with tears not yet thick enough to hide an evident sincerity. She unclenched the fist, held out the hand.

Momentarily Webster mistrusted her. Suspecting a trap, he did not offer his hand in return. Priscilla's pawed the air, then clutched at his white house jacket; instantly she was weeping into it.

That fixed Mr. Webster Flagg. Awkwardly, at first, he patted the back of the blond head. "There, there," he soothed. "Everything's going to work out all right, Miss Priscilla."

He had never called her that before. From the depths of her woe she heard it and knew it signified a promotion in his esteem.

"Oh, thank you, Webster," she sobbed. "That's the nicest thing anyone ever said to me."

She cried for several more minutes before Webster thought it practical to suggest that she blow her nose and

start acting sensible. Obediently she took a fresh tissue out of her pinafore pocket and followed his first suggestion.

"You're good," she said. "You're very good. I know you are going to help me."

"For just what do you need help, Miz Taylor?" he reverted to the more distant form of address.

"Miss Priscilla, please," she corrected. "I don't know for just what. Lots of things. The telegram for example. Yesterday, when I talked to the police, they asked me what I was doing in this apartment. I said I'd come to feed the cat. I thought they looked a little dubious, so afterwards I called Western Union for a copy of the message which had been phoned to me, for proof if I ever should need it. I was told they had no record of such a wire."

Webster scratched his underlip with a thumbnail. He should have guessed that Bill Patterson had not sent a wire from Washington asking Priscilla to feed the cat. On Thursday, when in the normal course of events Webster himself would have been there to handle it? Unless Bill knew that Webster's key had been stolen and he would not be at work that particular Thursday. . . .

"Maybe there never was a telegram, Miss Priscilla," he suggested gently.

"You mean you think I made it up?" she wailed. "Oh, Webster! If you think so, how can I expect the police to believe me?"

"I don't think so," he asserted with one or two mental reservations. "But you might very well have had a make-believe wire read to you over the phone by someone who wanted you to find the body."

"But who could hate me so?" she asked. Her fist screwed tight again, and her face contorted in rage. "Althea," she whispered. "Althea hates me like that."

"No, she doesn't, miss," Webster said without conviction. He'd seen Miss Althea licking her chops over Johnson Taylor, and would not expect her to be gallant about a successful rival.

"It was a woman's voice that called," Priscilla persisted.

"And it sounded like Miss Althea?"

"I couldn't say that definitely. It was a typical telephone operatory sort of voice, but you know how Miss Tamblyn is. She can mimic anyone."

"That's true, Miss Priscilla," he said sternly. "But unless you can positively say it was Miss Althea I don't think you should make the accusation. After all, whoever called you, or got some woman to call you for him if it was a man, knew what you would find in this apartment. I think we've got a lot of stones to upturn before we go naming names."

There was much work ahead, and he realized that he'd better get on with it. There was no time to listen to Priscilla's purely personal conjectures, especially since she seemed either unwilling or unable to give with many facts. A relationship which was not enmity had been established between them, and he had learned that Mr. Rutherford had been remarkably drunk the night he died. After that grievous slip Priscilla would be bound to clam up.

"I have to get to my marketing, ma'am," he said by way of dismissal. "Mr. Patterson is having himself a little dinner party this evening."

"Yes, I know," she said. "My husband and I are coming."

That was Patterson for you, Webster thought. He was as unimaginative about his guests on his first night to howl as he was about his suits. The man had no enterprise whatsoever.

As she closed the door, Webster rushed to the chair, whipped out the lighter Bill Patterson had given him Christmas before last, aimed it at the welting. He flicked the wheel; the wick caught fire, but not the chair.

He fanned the lighter in an arc across the material, which resisted as stubbornly as green wood resists a hungry camper. Then he tested the legs and the canvas underpinning, with similar lack of success.

Case closed, he thought, shutting the lighter and stand-

ing up. The state rests. He was almost disappointed. This was fully enough story to take to the police, to focus their attention upon the Taylor apartment.

But Priscilla didn't live in that apartment alone. There was also her husband, whom Webster liked. Priscilla loved him, and would go to all lengths to protect him. If she were herself innocent of the murder she would infer only one thing from the discovery of this chair in her home, the fact that Johnson was implicated, and she must, at any cost, save him.

Maybe dumping Rutherford's chair back where it came from wasn't the smartest trick in the world, but it might have been the only one occurring to a desperate woman. She hadn't expected an observer. If she was covering up for Johnson, fearing yet facing up to the possibility of his guilt, Webster would not be a blabbermouth.

5

A FEW SECONDS later Webster left the apartment, carrying a braided hemp shopping bag and a tightly wrapped bundle of garbage. The elevator took him as far as the first floor. From there he descended a narrow, rickety stairway to the basement.

He dodged his way among trash bins, broken furniture, and coal scuttles to the cast-iron garbage container at the foot of the dumb-waiter. The place had never smelled worse, he thought. It was like fish-cannery row under less than ideal wind conditions. He almost vetoed the lobsters at this reminder of the briny deep at its worst.

He immediately spotted the source of this redolence, his eyesight being keener than that of the janitor. Wedged into a crack between the cellar floor and the base of the dumb-waiter shaft was a fish head. With a red, wholly disillusioned eye it peered at Webster as though it had

reversed the tables and was angling for him, trying to tell him something. In this atmosphere, however, he was in no mood for fish stories. He rushed to the street to fill his lungs with air.

He glanced up at his people's windows, as he always did in passing. He saw the Taylors' sash curtain fall swiftly into place and chuckled softly to himself, figuring that Miss Priscilla was also playing detective.

In the grocery store he vouched for Patterson's credit and, as he had expected, had no trouble in obtaining the necessary items. To his personal account he charged a can of cold beer and a hot pastrami on rye.

This was one of those neighborhood markets dotted about New York wherein the stock is sophisticated, the clientele urbane, yet the mood is identical with that of a country store; the only thing Pumpkin Corners' General Merchandise had that it lacked was a post office. However, even without benefit of readable post cards, it was a newsy hangout.

The proprietress, slicing the pastrami thin, said it was a shame about Mr. Rutherford, wasn't it? Webster unhesitatingly agreed.

"And to think," she went on, spreading mustard on the rye, "that he was in here only the night before they found him. He was in good health, and he was explaining that he was making such a small order because he was going on a trip. He went on a trip all right, the poor cuss. Well, we all got to go sometime."

Wondering whether she used the word "cuss" as a diminutive for "customer," Webster simultaneously recalled that Priscilla, also, had mentioned a trip in connection with Rutherford.

"Did he say where he was going?" he asked.

The woman sliced a pickle razor-thin and rolled her eyes heavenward. To shunt off any metaphysical discussion, Webster rephrased his question: "I mean, did he say where he aimed to go?"

"I don't recall it," she said, frowning in concentration.

"The store was very busy at the time. I think he said only that he was going out of town for a couple of days, and he was as excited about it as a little boy. Mr. Rutherford was a man who loved his home and stuck pretty close by it, as you well know. But we all need a change sometime, don't you think?"

"Yes, I do," he mumbled. His purchases were already within the hemp bag, but he made no move toward departure. He stood there, head down, thinking a thought through to the end.

There was no reason why Mr. Rutherford should have told him last Thursday that he planned to go away the following week. That is, there was no reason why any other employer who planned to be away should have mentioned the fact. Webster was a self-contained mechanism. He let himself in, did his work, and was gone, having stirred up scarcely a ripple. But Mr. Rutherford was unlike any other employer—any other person, you might almost say—and Webster knew him down to the ultimate quirk.

Mr. Rutherford was no vagabond. A trip for him would have been a project planned to the last detail, documented fully at least a week in advance. Part of the planning, Webster was sure, would have involved a list of things to be done in his absence, principally by Webster. No Arab he, Mr. Rutherford would not fold his tent and silently steal away, not without issuing instructions to have it cleaned and pressed.

He didn't believe in the trip. But what did that leave him? He groped, dredged up a possibility.

"Do you happen to remember who else was in the store at the same time as Mr. Rutherford?" he asked.

"Let's see now." She consulted the purchase slips on a spindle in the back of her mind, remembered. "It was a regular gathering of the clans, you might say. Miss Tamblyn was here, waiting for a broiler to be cleaned. Mrs. Taylor was back for olives for her husband's martini, which she had overlooked, and that new fellow, Mr. Randall, was buying beer. Mr. Rutherford said good-by to

all of them and that he'd be back by Friday because some art critics were coming to look at his collection."

Somebody saw him before Friday, Webster thought as he picked up the shopping bag. The way it looked was that somebody, believing Rutherford to be away, had stolen Webster's key and walked straight into a trap. It was simply unfortunate that Mr. Rutherford, the trap setter, had himself been caught.

Webster wondered what bait he had used.

Although he dismissed as specious Priscilla Taylor's contention that a thief had murdered Rutherford, Webster willingly admitted that an incidental burglary might have taken place. The information furnished by the shopkeeper had provided him with a sturdy-looking hypothesis; he tested its durability as soon as he returned to the scene of the crime.

Rutherford, he postulated, had never had any intention of leaving the city, and yet had wanted to plant the idea of his absence firmly in the minds of his so-called friends, which could only mean that he expected one of them to avail himself of it. This indicated a diffused suspicion that one of the coterie coveted something badly enough to swipe it if an opportunity was presented. It was a queer, uneasy way to feel about one's nearest and dearest, and Webster congratulated himself upon not having been included in the general mistrust.

This was in no way surprising. For years he had had access to every nook of this apartment He even knew where Rutherford kept his reserve cash supply. He checked this immediately, finding it intact. Rutherford habitually carried only small sums of money on his person, preferring to frequent places where his name on a tab was as honorable as currency. Whatever his wallet contained he had presumably, and despite the adage, taken with him on his fiery journey, unless he had left it in the pocket of another suit.

Webster did not bother to check the clothes closet inas-

much as none of the neighbors seemed to be the type who would steal money. The potentiality of *big* money to be made might attract them, they being only human, but the immediate acquisition of a paltry amount would be wholly without charm. Robbery, for such practitioners, would have to be dressed up pretty to make the game worth the candle.

What had Mr. Shakespeare said? "Who steals my purse steals trash, but a good name is worth more than riches." Or were those fragments of speeches from two different plays Webster had done that summer in Baltimore? No matter. At any rate they made sense and suggested a possibility. Mr. Rutherford's name, if not precisely good, was a sound economic investment, and if someone tried to take it from him he'd have put up a devil of a fight. Seeking material which might have been used as blackmail, Webster went to the secret drawer in the ornately inlaid cabinet, where Mr. Rutherford kept his important papers.

It was improbable that even the most zealous thief could have penetrated into this hideaway. Webster himself had taken fifty minutes by the clock to learn the intricate sequence of petal-pushing, calyx-pressing, and stem-touching required before the drawer would open. Mr. Rutherford had painstakingly taught him so that he might telephone Webster when he wished information about the drawer's contents. A half dozen times during the last few years Webster had been called, wherever he happened to be working, and asked to look up something or other. The request was never made whimsically, but only through dire necessity, because opening comprised only half of the drawer's secrecy. The real poser was closing, which demanded the services of two sets of moving men, plus a cabinet maker to reset the mechanism.

The intimate connection of Althea Tamblyn to most of the furniture in this apartment crossed Webster's mind, and he wondered if the secret drawer was an open book to her. But he was almost certain that the cabinet antedated her influence in the household, that she had, in

fact, pleaded that it be scrapped when she took over. It therefore seemed unthinkable that anyone at all could have opened and closed the drawer, and that whatever luscious tidbit it might contain was still inside.

Webster fingered through the papers, many of which were old friends. New was a bill of sale for the last painting Mr. Rutherford had bought, a Rouault, also a receipt, signed by Althea Tamblyn, for one Cézanne, returned. The rubber-banded stack of insurance policies seemed a little less bulky than Webster remembered it, but this was explained by a notice of cancellation of all fire insurance, effective the preceding January and testifying to confidence in the fireproofing material. Too bad, Webster thought. The heirs could have collected on that chair.

The thought of an heir set him searching for a will. He did not find one, nor had he expected one, any more than there was any life insurance. Mr. Rutherford had been one who believed that if you ignored death the apathy would be mutual; not until the Grim Reaper was breathing down his neck would he have set pen to paper.

Rutherford's dying intestate was a probability Webster had philosophically faced for years. Now that it was realized, and the absence of a will or its copy in this drawer seemed conclusive, Webster's stoic calm briefly deserted him. He had never planned on receiving all the things Rutherford had, at various times, promised to bequeath to him, but a little something to remember him by would have been nice. When jovially pickled, Rutherford had even mentioned leaving these apartment houses to Webster, a prospect to gladden the heart. "My real-estate holdings." Webster had in secret rehearsed the phrase to tone up its quality of casualness. Now, apparently, he wasn't even to own a flowerpot.

With a sigh, he returned to his inventory of the drawer. The only other thing therein which was unfamiliar to him was a lined sheet of stationery Upon it was scrawled, in a quavery hand, a note which began, "My dear Nephew.

"I'm afraid I shall not see you again before the end,

which draws very near," it went on, and he wondered whether it meant the writer's end or Rutherford's. He resumed reading:

"But I shall be able to go beyond more happily knowing that you are taking care of your cousin's boy. He is the only one but you left in the family, so we ought to be good to him because with him the line dies out. I have always been grieved that you did not marry, but if there are to be no more Rutherfords in the world let's be sure there's a happy Randall."

"Randall?" Webster thought. "Randall." He read on hastily. There it was:

"David is a good boy. I am sure you will never regret befriending him."

David Randall. The nebulous neighbor. The new Wednesday bachelor Webster had never seen.

It took all of his stick-to-itiveness to finish the matter at hand, the cataloguing of Mr. Rutherford's apartment, before dashing over to the Randall flat, which suddenly was fraught with interest.

Next he inspected Mr. Rutherford's art collection. There was a baker's dozen pictures, although never more than twelve were hanging at one time. Each month, in rotation, the fussy owner sent one out to be cleaned, to be stripped of the East River soot which would dim its beauty. It was one of Miss Tamblyn's special services.

They were hung in a double row in the high-ceilinged room, and had been chosen with an eye to uniformity of size rather than subject. Large pictures, they were somewhat staggering at close range, but Mr. Rutherford had not cared for small paintings. That was why he had rejected the Cézanne Miss Althea had recently bought for him.

They looked the same as usual to Webster, even the Picasso, looking like the Christmas-morning child whose the preceding Thursday.

Mr. Rutherford had lain late that morning, flushed, like

a brandied ripe peach. Webster, handing him a milk punch spiked with brandy, felt a not unfamiliar sense of superiority to the man in the bed. After all, Rutherford had merely served as host at the soiree the night before, whereas Webster had literally served as butler, bartender, and caterer, then had got himself home and back to work on time in the morning.

Glass in hand, Rutherford had got up and padded into the living room on his plump bare feet, as determined as a child on Christmas morning.

"Webster!" he yelled, his voice hoarse with sleep and alcohol. "Come here."

Webster, sure that the room had been thoroughly slicked before his departure last night, went without trepidation and found Mr. Rutherford standing in front of the Picasso, looking like the Christmas-morning child whose faith in Santa has suffered a serious setback.

"Does that look all right to you?" he bellowed, gesticulating so precipitately that a cluster of foam slid from his glass to the carpet.

"In what way, sir?" Webster asked guardedly. He was not a devout fan of the Spanish artist, and would have preferred reserving his opinion.

"I mean does it look the same as usual?"

"Just about," was the considered reply. "It's a little cleaner than sometimes, sir, because it was the last one out, just before the Tchelichew."

"But it looks the same to you as when it was last clean?" Rutherford pressed dubiously. Then, all at once, he smiled. "Of course it does," he declared. "Crackpot who was here last night, calls himself an art expert, claimed it was a phony. Funny thing, he was one of the three who authenticated it for me when I bought it. Now he's gone back on his word. Art expert! Phooey!"

He took a deep swig of his punch and laughed jovially. "Why, I know more about art than he'll learn in a lifetime," he chortled. He cocked his head to one side and tried to squint at the picture over his outstretched thumb;

such, however, was his condition that he succeeded only in looking cross-eyed.

"I bet you're a better art expert than he is, Webster," he continued. "You poor, ignorant, untutored thing. He said, that so-called expert, that he'd come back here with his calipers or what-do-you-call-'ems and prove he was right."

He teetered, drank, the milk punch dribbling like yellow saliva down his chin.

"Do you know what I'll tell him when he comes?" he roared. "I'll tell him that my nigger servant knows more . . ."

Webster, choking down his rage, didn't hear the rest. He'd heard enough, that word which doubled up his fists as though they had been seized by sudden cramp. "Act humble, Webster," he told himself. "Not *be* humble. *Act* humble."

Rutherford, who had used that infuriating word only once before in their long association, who did not, in his soddenness, know he had used it now, went on cheerily:

"Professor Webster, will you give me your expert criticism of my pictures?"

"Gladly," he replied through stiff lips. He stood tall and spoke distinctly then, his anger amplifying his voice:

"To tell you the truth, I don't think there's one of them as pretty as all the folding money you laid out to buy them. I think you were had. I think the dealers saw you coming."

Rutherford's eyes narrowed to pig size and searched about the room for a flaw, for something with which to taunt his adversary. "This place is a mess," he said quarrelsomely, and untruthfully. "Clean it up. Straighten that lampshade. It's crooked."

It was indeed, Webster was forced to admit to himself. But it was not his fault. "Mr. Patterson must have knocked it askew when he came home," he guessed aloud.

"Home?" Rutherford repeated with the tragic intonation of Oedipus. "A lot Mr. Patterson cares about home.

Even when he's not on the road he comes in late, sometimes stays out all night."

His tragic manner struck Webster as ludicrous, intensified the contempt in which he presently held his employer. Usually Mr. Rutherford moped around about how his house had been virtually snatched out from under him by that invader, Bill Patterson; now he was complaining like an aggrieved wife of her husband's nocturnal neglect.

"One small favor only," he whined, "I ask in return for housing him. But is he ever around when I need him? No!" he thundered, while Webster made a brief mental catalogue of Bill's known talents, wondering which one might make him indispensable.

"I am imposed upon, used——" Rutherford broke off and crooned in self-pity.

"But you fix that lampshade, you lazy nigger," he resumed dictatorially. "Don't tell me who made it crooked. I'm telling *you* to fix it."

Then Webster began talking back and they were at it, hotly and heavily, until both of them were spent. Webster heard an indignant banging on the wall from Miss Althea's apartment next door and figured that she must be home with one of her sick headaches, which this fracas could be doing no good.

But it couldn't be stopped, this side of exhaustion. Webster realized, in spite of the number of things which were said, that he said nothing about what had really made him angry, as people so often do not, and that Rutherford might unwittingly reuse that red-flag word in the future.

But now, of course, eight days later, that danger was no longer present.

He fine-toothed the rest of the place, finding little to arouse his suspicions. There were some unfamiliar spots on the rug in the small hallway which connected the bedrooms and kitchen with the living room. Crude, amateurish attempt had evidently been made to remove these,

and Mr. Rutherford's pet cleaning fluid which never left a ring had left several.

On second thought Webster checked the bottle to determine whether this particular cleaner had been used. Only sparingly if at all, he decided, reckoning that there was now almost as much as there had been last Thursday. Not nearly enough had been subtracted to cause those smears on the rug. Obviously, another brand had been smuggled in.

A fine, inflammable type, he theorized. Suppose, he mused, that Mr. Rutherford had not been merely dead-drunk when the chair burned but dead, period. Suppose that indefinite intruder had killed him in some other cranny of the apartment and had then dragged him into position. This hallway was the axis, the intersection through which murderer and murderee must pass. And if Rutherford had been bleeding of mortal wounds the rug would inevitably have been spotted in just this fashion.

That implied lack of premeditation, which dovetailed with Webster's hypothesis of Rutherford's lying in wait for a nefarious caller; probably deeply in wait, if Webster truly knew his love of the dramatic, counting slowly to one thousand by fives until he chose to shout, "I spy." The visitor, taken by surprise, may have killed his host almost inadvertently.

Then what would he do, what would anyone do with a dead Rutherford on his hands? Logically enough, he'd get a chair which was at least visually identical with one belonging to his victim, if such an article were within easy reach, and tee the corpse up in it. He'd also get cleaning fluid in the handy economy size, handy both for starting fires and cleaning bloodstains.

Confident that he had figured out the How, Webster heaved a wistful sigh for the By Whom. The question propelled him toward the Peters-Randall apartment, a prospect too enticing to be allowed to languish on the vine. In an instant he was climbing the green stairs to the roof.

6

He NEARLY tumbled down the red stairs in the adjoining building in his haste, but he slowed to a halt at their foot. He listened acutely, but could detect no sound in either apartment, the Taylors' to his right, the direction from which he had come, nor the Randall-Peters' to his left. He picked out the key to the latter and entered boldly.

His first reaction was incredulity that two persons, even bachelors, could get a place so messed up in two days. He'd cleaned it conscientiously day before yesterday. Now it looked like the wake of an exceptionally vicious tornado.

It was strewn with magazines and newspapers. On the desk was a tray sporting dirty dishes and a glass containing either iced tea or dead beer with a cigarette submerged in it. The floor was littered with bits of thread and scraps of material. There was a disturbing unquiet in the room, a Tower of Babel confusion; in a slow take, as he recovered from the initial impact of disorder, Webster found the major cause.

The room had erupted in a rash of slip covers. All over Miss Althea's slick, streamlined purchases were the busiest chintzes ever beheld. Luther Burbank would have fainted with joy at the ivy which bore roses as big as cabbages, the red-berried palm trees, but they left Webster cold. There were too many interruptions, squiggly lines that went nowhere, stripes that blinded. The nightmare of them all was an indigestible Oriental concoction of cherry blossoms, wading birds, Fujiyama rampant, and Madame Butterfly couchant in the company of a samisen-playing geisha girl.

This, Webster realized with mounting excitement, was on the chair! The ubiquitous, ever-loving chair. Could it be that the chair, for some reason, had needed recovering,

and that fancy pants had been put on all the other furniture in the room so it would not stand out like a sore thumb?

He knelt before it. The cover was drum-tight, could not be budged.

Viewed up close, all the work was obviously home done. Not only was it doubtful whether any professional upholsterer would have risked being caught dead with such materials; had one been so daring, he would have had more of each on hand. This was unmistakably mill-end stuff, so scant that patching and gusseting had been necessary. The back of the couch cover, for instance, had been eked out with denim.

It was none of his business, Webster chided himself, how his clients spent their spare time. Furthermore, it was not his place to decide that sewing was a suspiciously dainty pastime for a bachelor. More virile hobbies, such as ship-model carving, were equally messy. He just hoped, with a sniff, that Messrs. Peters and Randall would tidy up after themselves before it was time for him to come in and clean house.

Bluebeard's wife never so itched to open a closet as did Webster as he neared the one forbidden on Wednesdays. Today, Friday, it wasn't locked. In fact, it quite evidently would not be locked again before some rather extensive repairs were made upon it.

Someone whose eagerness had surpassed even his had done a thorough job of getting that door open, had hacked at the wood, split the jamb, even loosened one of the hinges. Visibility of what lay within was poor, so he put his hand on the knob and tugged. The door jarred open and a hatbox tumbled to the floor.

He stood there holding his breath, his eyes wide, for the hat which slid out of the box was small and feminine and laden with flowers. When he could tear his attention away from it he noted that all the other clothes in this closet

were likewise feminine to an excessive degree, the high-heeled shoes, the fluffy negligee, the printed dresses, which could have been chosen only by the selector of the slip-cover material. He'd thought this place might contain the locked-up liquor, but what it really held was dynamite.

He gave a low whistle and a loud chuckle before he heard another door opening, one behind him. He knew which one that would be, the one leading from the bath into the bedroom. He didn't need to turn around, and he didn't want to until he had thought up an opening line to justify his being on stage.

He heard someone walking toward him across the carpet, sounding slow, slurred, barefooted, and all the words he ever knew deserted him like rats leaving a sinking ship. It didn't matter, though, because what he saw when he finally turned around would have knocked him speechless anyhow.

It was a girl. Although a man of some sophistication, he was always acutely embarrassed when he surprised a girl in the apartment of one of his bachelors, any one of whom, he was sure, would be glad to give houseroom to this one. To them she would look like August on the Petty calendar, or the way peach melba sounds. She was curvy and red-haired, the kind of redhead who can wear pink, which she was now doing, if fragmentarily. There was a hint of laughter in her brown eyes as though she savored his discomfiture as she stood there relaxed, leaning against the door frame, waiting for him to speak.

At long last he cleared his throat. "I'm Webster," he said idiotically. "I clean for Mr. Randall and Mr. Peters."

"Hi, Webster." Red said indolently, extending her hand. "Glad to know you. I'm Peters."

His mind raced wildly. If there wasn't a will, there was a way that this young lady might become very rich indeed; by ceasing to be Peters and becoming Mrs. Randall, the wife of Rutherford's sole surviving kin.

This manifestation had opened up new territory with

the thoroughness and speed of blasting; it would take him a little while to acclimatize himself to the other side of the mountain.

"Miss Peters," he said, "I know you're going to be mad at me, and I've no doubt you've every right to be, but that locked closet's been provocating me ever since I came to work for you. To tell you the truth, I didn't like it. My people don't have to lock their things up. I'm not a snooper."

"Obviously," she said with clear mockery, waving toward the battered door. "That's why you jimmied it open last Wednesday."

"Miss Peters," he protested hotly, "to my dying day I'll swear I didn't do no such thing. It was locked like always when I left on Wednesday."

"Well, it was busted like that when Mr. Randall and I got home from the theater Wednesday evening," she said positively. "And incidentally, it's Mrs. Randall, not Miss Peters."

She was too busy acting the lady of the house to notice Webster's bemusement. "Mrs. Randall?" he stammered.

"That's right," she said, and flashed a smile. "No hard feeling about the door. I'm just too darn happy to be mad about anything. We'll get it fixed, and I won't even take it out of your pay."

"But I didn't do it, ma'am," he insisted. "Look, let me ask you just one thing: if I busted down the door on Wednesday, why would I come back on Friday to see what is inside?"

She frowned. "You've got a point there, for sure," she admitted. "But how else could it have happened? I was out all day shopping and met my husband downtown for dinner before the theater. Mr. Rutherford had given us tickets he couldn't use because he was going out of town.

"When we came home the closet was like this. The windows were locked; so was the front door. Nothing was missing, and I've got a few little valuables around so it

couldn't have been burglars. We naturally thought your curiosity had gotten the best of you."

"No, ma'am, it didn't, though I'm free to say I was powerfully curious about what you had in there. I thought maybe it was the liquor, and you wouldn't need to go and do that. Anyone can tell you that Webster doesn't take anything unless it's offered to him."

He stooped over to rescue the frilly bonnet and place it neatly in its box, which he set atop the cased sewing machine. "Are you hinting?" she asked, bringing him up abruptly. Her brown eyes were gay and seemed entirely friendly, but he was too involved with his injured dignity to drop the subject.

"Thirteen years I worked for Mr. Rutherford," he declared, "and never once did I take so much as a postage stamp. If he were alive today, he'd tell you so."

"But he isn't alive today." Her voice was triumphant. "Rest his soul," she added most piously, while her eyes laughed out loud at a secret joke to which Webster was more privy than she knew.

"No, ma'am, he isn't. But there's others who'll tell you——"

"Oh, skip it!" she interrupted. "You don't need any references. I would have been drooly to know what was in there myself. As a matter of fact, you would have found it open next Wednesday. The game of hide-and-seek is over, Allah be praised!"

She walked by him into the kitchen, calling back, "There's beer on ice. Let's have my coming-out-into-the-open party."

She put two chilled beer cans on the kitchen table, opened them, and drank deeply from one. Webster, ever the stickler, brought two mugs from the china closet and filled them despite her protests.

"I'll wash them before I go," he assured her. "It'll take me only a minute, Mrs. Randall"

"Mrs. Randall," she repeated raptly. "I do love the

sound of that. David's bringing home a name plate for the doorbell tonight that says, 'Mr. and Mrs. David Randall, Apartment 6 N.' It'll be the most beautiful thing I ever saw."

He looked at her sharply to estimate whether this was her first beer of the day or one of several, then instantly scolded himself for having maligned her. Her cheeks were flushed, and she *was* intoxicated in a way, but from pure joy and not malt extracts. It occurred to him that if Mr. Rutherford's demise could make anyone this happy it was almost a pity that someone hadn't arranged it sooner.

"Heck, I might as well tell you." She came to a decision. "You'll find out anyhow. You see, Mr. Rutherford was my husband's cousin. His rich cousin. He brought Davey here to the city when he graduated from law school and got him a job in his own lawyer's firm for the sole purpose of getting rid of me. Cousin Mortimer's aunt—Davey's droopy old great-aunt—wrote that he was in grave danger of marrying beneath them all. But they got round to locking the stable door a bit late, after the filly had already nosed in."

Webster laughed politely but uncomfortably. He was almost of a mind to side with the elder members of the Randall-Rutherford clan. The sort of girl who likes to sit in the kitchen and chatter so frankly to the servants was not the ideal twig to graft upon a proud family tree. Manfully he concealed his disapproval as she chattered on:

"The hiding's been awful, Webster. I even had to hide from you on Wednesdays, so Mr. Rutherford couldn't pump you about who 'Peters' was. He was dying to know, but Davey played cagey, said it was an old school chum who was out of town a lot. But now"—she beamed at her rosy future, which was evidently situated somewhere in the vicinity of the stove—"now everything's going to be wonderful."

Rinsing out the mugs, Webster hoped she was right. This had very nearly perfect fairy-story ingredients, the beauteous maiden in love with the unacknowledged princeling, the

horrid ogre—Mr. Rutherford should pardon the expression—who stands in their way. This would certainly be the happy ending if Mr. Rutherford had died naturally in his bed.

But this he had not been allowed to do. Someone had not waited for time's due, if plodding, course. In view of that, it did not seem probable that the prince and princess would be permitted to live happily ever after.

Because, reasonably or otherwise, certain persons would always wonder, until the actual giant-killer was postively identified.

Mrs. Randall remained seated at the kitchen table, pensively twisting a strand of red hair.

"I'm sort of an open-faced character by nature," she mused. "It's going to be nice to explain myself to the neighbors, instead of just being the little woman who wasn't there. They must think I'm all kinds of you-know-what, instead of my only crime being that I was married to the guy. That Mrs. Taylor, for instance, across the hall. What's she like, Webster? Is she nice?"

"Very nice, ma'am," he said primly.

"Well, heaven knows what she thinks of me, or of Davey for that matter, because I kept bumping into her at the oddest hours. Once," she giggled disarmingly, "we both opened our dumb-waiter doors at the same moment. We could have shaken hands across the shaft. I just stood there with my mouth open until I could get the door shut. Can you blame me? I didn't have a stitch on."

She sighed and stood up, continuing, "I'd planned to call on her this afternoon to make an honest woman of myself, but I heard her go out about an hour ago. She must have been going somewhere special because she had on high heels."

She started across the room, then paused. "I'm glad to have met you, Webster," she said with surprising formality, like a child remembering her manners.

"It's mutual," he told her. "I know it will be a pleasure working for you."

Before she moved on he saw her for a moment in profile against the dark blue of a kitchen cabinet; he hoped his gasp was inaudible, but if he'd ever seen a motive for murder walking, Mrs. Randall was certainly it.

Irrefutably she was more than a little bit pregnant.

7

PRISCILLA'S HIGH HEELS were hooked about the rung of a chair in the kitchen of her old home near Sheepshead Bay. She was leaning forward tensely.

"Mrs. O'Mara"—she addressed the housekeeper who had taken charge just before the wedding—"please try to remember. Surely my grandfather must have mentioned where it is, this laboratory he goes to. Don't you know what street it's on, or the telephone number?"

"There ain't no phone." Mrs. O'Mara's mouth was a slit in the reddened face which always looked as though it had been bent over a hot stove.

"I think it's dreadful." Priscilla shook her head disconsolately "An old man like that alone in some unknown place—what did you say, two days a week?"

"Sometimes three," the woman said complacently.

"But why didn't you let me know? How long has it been going on?"

"It's been going on since a bit after you came home from your honeymoon. As to why I didn't let you know"—she sniffed huffily, and Priscilla made a solemn pledge to replace her as soon as she could find someone else willing to take on the Victorian house with owner to match—"it appeared to me that if you cared anything at all about your grandfather you'd have stepped out of that bew-dwar of yours now and then for a breath of fresh air, and you'd have come over here and found out for yourself what he was up to."

"Touché," Priscilla conceded inaudibly. If any harm came to Grandfather because of what Mrs. O'Mara obviously considered amorous dalliance even though it had the blessing of the church, Priscilla would never forgive herself.

"But why should he do it?" she asked crossly, transferring the blame where it indubitably belonged, on Old Man Hartman's stooped shoulders. "Heaven knows he's got enough space right here for a dozen laboratories. Why does he need some outside spot?"

Mrs. O'Mara's shrug indicated that the vagaries of her employer were far beyond her. "He's up to something heathenish, I guess. Inventions!" Her contempt included all that had followed the wheel. "He don't want me to see what it is. Maybe he's building a space ship. Or one of them superatomic rockets.

"He's getting a little second-childish, you know. Fusses. And stubborn! You should have heard him battling with Mr. Patterson last night."

"Mr. Patterson?" Priscilla echoed in astonishment. "Last night?"

"Yes. He stayed over, here. He often does. Since you got married, Mr. Hartman has seen Mr. Patterson more than he has his flesh and blood. Usually they play pinochle. Last night they were yammering away at one another——

"Saaaay," she interrupted herself, "come to think of it, one of the things they were shouting about was Mr. Hartman's hideaway laboratory. Mr. Patterson didn't approve of it, neither. Maybe he could tell you where it's at."

"Yes." Priscilla started for the telephone in the hall. "Yes. I'll call him at his office right away."

But no, she reversed herself as her hand reached for the receiver. She was going to see Bill in less than two hours, at his dinner party. How could she explain her all-fired hurry to get hold of Grandfather right this minute? Besides, she was too keyed up, Bill, who had loved her,

would be bound to hear the agitation in her voice.

No, for sure. Better to ask him calmly tonight if he knew Grandfather's elusive whereabouts. Maybe even better not to mention knowing of the mysterious annex to the old man's home laboratory. She could return here tomorrow, Saturday, while Johnson was attending Rutherford's funeral, for she would not be such a hypocrite as to go to that ceremony herself.

She might even remain through lunch, doing penance for her recent neglect, depriving herself of Johnson's Saturday free time. If she thus appeased the gods, they might arrange it so the bottle of fireproofing liquid would not be needed until tomorrow.

Or she might be able to procure it now. "Mrs. O'Mara," she called. "Have you the key to the basement laboratory?"

"Indeed I have not." It was a retort. "Mr. Hartman carries that with him. You staying for supper?"

"No," shamefacedly, "I can't. I have an engagement. I may have lunch with you tomorrow, however."

The marble clock in the parlor chimed a quarter to five and she said, "I must run now. Don't tell Mr. Hartman I was here, or that I may come back tomorrow. I want to surprise him."

"Hummph," observed Mrs. O'Mara as Priscilla dashed past her.

The cab driver, who had refused to venture this deeply into Brooklyn without the guarantee of a return fare, was stretching his legs. When he spied Priscilla he beamed happily and headed back toward the taxi, opened the door for her.

She didn't have the whole back seat to herself. A large portion of it was taken up by a cardboard carton containing a chair. *The* chair, which was in every store in town, except the first three you shopped when you were in a frightful hurry and just had to get a chair because you'd been stupid enough to move one out of your own apartment. Well, she'd got it, at last.

She'd be happier if Grandfather had been at home,

puttering in his basement laboratory, where he always kept a supply of the fireproofing material on hand. If he had sprayed this new chair, when she had smuggled it into her apartment it would verify the story she had told Webster that morning, that more than one chair had been processed, that the infallible Althea had slipped there.

Her hands clenched into fists as she reflected how differently Althea would have handled this situation into which she had betrayed herself. In the first place, Althea would never have transported her own chair into Rutherford's apartment, running the risk of being caught. If, however, Althea had been absolutely certain that she would not be observed, she would first have checked the chair's flammability.

Priscilla had not even suspected that the chair in which Rutherford should have been sitting Wednesday night had somehow strayed into the home of Mrs. Johnson Taylor—*Mr.* and Mrs. Johnson Taylor, which made it worse. Not until Webster acted so suspicious had she even considered the possibility.

Then, when Webster went out to do the marketing and the vigilance she had been applying to her window was rewarded by a glimpse of him, she had returned to Rutherford's, held a match to the chair, and learned the worst. What, she now asked herself, would Althea have done at this point? Probably the dirty trick which Priscilla had thought of and immediately discarded; to scoop up the chair, take it back to her own apartment, subsequently to deny that it had ever been anywhere else save in Webster's lurid imagination, if the need for such denial ever arose.

But Priscilla had evolved another scheme, characteristically inept she supposed bitterly, but with at least a chance of success. She would say—would swear, if necessary—that the chair Webster had seen her delivering was one she had found on the roof, which she had immediately recognized as belonging in Rutherford's apartment, and that he had misunderstood her.

Where else but on the roof would anyone with a talent for murder leave such a damaging bit of evidence? Surely not in his own apartment. Or *her* own apartment. What made me say "his"? I'm not usually so grammatically accurate; why not "their"? Do I really believe that Johnson—

She broke off, not permitting herself even to think the rest of that question. She had promised to love and cherish, which tacitly included to trust. She trusted, and knew that ultimately everything would be explained to her. Meanwhile, there were circumstances which might look odd to persons of less friendly disposition.

These I have rectified, she assured herself. There is not, or soon will not be, an empty space in my apartment where a chair ought to stand. It would be better if my chair were fireproofed when people start holding candles to things, because then I could ask, "Why should I move one fireproofed chair into Rutherford's, to disown it, when the chair in my possession is identical?" That ought to stop them from saying dreadful things about Johnson, things no just God would permit to be true.

The cab turned off the East River Drive to begin the last lap of its current journey. She looked at the meter, then groped in her pocketbook. She'd had to pay cash for the chair so no record of its purchase would show up on a charge account or in her checkbook. The transaction had left her without enough for the fare out to Brooklyn, the wait, the traffic-bound trip back to Manhattan.

Webster, she thought relievedly; this time I'm glad he's in Rutherford's apartment.

She told the driver to wait, found the elevator on the first floor, went to Rutherford's door and rang the bell. Webster answered.

"I've done the silliest thing," she said breathlessly "I went shopping and spent all my money. I'm short two sixty on my cab fare. Could you—"

He had already taken a wallet from his trouser pocket.

"Happy to oblige, Miss Priscilla," he said. "Why don't

you let me go down and pay the man and bring up your bundles?"

"Oh no," she said swiftly.

"Why not, miss? It's late, and you ought to be half dressed for Mr. Patterson's party. Let me pay him."

"No!" she said urgently, holding out her hand for the money.

Webster was peeling off dollar bills deliberately.

"Did you include the tip in that two sixty, miss?" he asked ingenuously.

"Mercy, no. I forgot."

"What was your total bill?"

She didn't see the trap. She was so obsessed by the fear that he might push by her, go downstairs, and find the brand-new chair in the cab, that she couldn't see what was up the magician's sleeve. "Seventeen dollars and ten cents," she said.

Webster whistled, counted out a five, a single, a fifty-cent piece and a dime. "He should get every bit of that, ma'am," he said. "Miss Priscilla, you should have brought one of those bicycles back from Bermuda with you, you gonna run up mileage like that. Now hurry yourself up. The party starts in about half an hour."

"I'll be ready," she said, and ran toward the elevator.

8

THE TRAY OF canapés, Webster thought, could have served as a fitting memorial tribute to Mortimer Rutherford, more apt than any wreath of posies. Better than two hours had been spent upon its creation; now, at near six o'clock, he was willing to pronounce it perfect. The apartment was clean, the ice bucket full, and gin and vermouth, blended seven to one, was already chilling along with

the wine. Everything was ready for the arrival of Mr. Patterson and his guests.

During the infrequent intervals when he could get his mind off the caviar and capers he had thought about the murder, with ever-increasing distaste. Last night, at home, his career of detecting had begun in the manner of a chess problem, a strictly unemotional game of who killed Mortimer Rutherford, and if not, why not? Now it had become sicklied o'er with sentimentality, with red-haired expectant mothers and little blond brides who feared for their husbands. He had a fraction of an impulse to let the whole thing slide, to pretend it *was* an accident, but he knew that he would never again rest easy if he yielded to that weakness.

At six-five he went into the living room for a final once-over and was instantly grateful to the apprehension which had sent him there. Something important *had* been left undone; the secret of the secret drawer was out, like an Angus out of a bag, but there was no reason why its contents need be publicly displayed. He scooped up the papers, stood for a moment in indecision before he thought of a proper hiding place.

The late Mr. Rutherford's dispatch case struck him as being most appropriate, and he went to the closet in the foyer where it was usually kept. There it was, all right, a handsome cordovan affair with whipped seams and Mortimer's initials in gold, a gift for which the recipient had had little practical use. He had not been a toting man, nor a striver who brought home work to spoil an evening. On the rare occasions when he did carry it, Webster was sure it was done solely to make an impression, to label himself as a man with a lot of important business, and that the bag was actually stark empty.

If that had been true in the past, Webster was astonished to discover it was definitely not so now. The bag was not empty. On the contrary, it was packed and ready to go, as if Rutherford, and not Mrs. Randall, had

been expecting a trip to the hospital for a blessed event.

Shaking his head, fumbling in his haste, he checked the items it contained, fearful that Patterson or someone else would arrive before he had poked in all corners. Pajamas, scuffs, shaving gear and cream, new toothbrush and paste, one shirt, one pair of socks, were ticked off his mental list. Humbly he swallowed some rather strong assertions he had made earlier in the afternoon.

Mr. Rutherford *had* planned himself a little trip less than a week in advance, or at any rate without confiding in Webster or seeking his assistance. The latter alternative seemed less credible than the first, which was itself fantastic.

And what kind of trip? How far, and for how long could a fastidious character like Rutherford go with one clean shirt and an extra pair of socks? And with whom, you couldn't help wondering, since these were not his best pajamas.

They were not even his second best. They were an old, unglamorous pair of beat-up pongee which, he suddenly remembered, had come back from the laundry only Thursday a week, looking as though they could never brave the mangle again.

Only that Thursday, the last time he had seen their owner, which kiboshed any idea that Rutherford habitually stocked his dispatch case in this manner on the chance that he might run into a nice place to lie down after lunch. Flabbergasted, Webster yet saw clearly that his late employer had intended to go places unknown, and he solemnly buried his theory that the announced trip had been in truth a trap for the unwary.

He heard the elevator shiver to a stop and crammed both clothes and documents into the case. Then, a disheartened hawkshaw who felt himself back precisely where he started, he glided gracefully into the role of Perfect Servant, which, in a fine white coat, he every inch looked.

He had the door open before the keyless Mr. Patterson could ring the bell, once again thwarting that unfortunate gentleman of an opportunity to do so.

9

BILL, WHO HAD come home wilted as always, was still in the shower when the first guest, Althea Tamblyn, arrived. Webster greeted her with marked restraint, still nursing the bruises of that morning's telephone conversation.

She was wearing a most flamboyant garment which was barely—and he did mean barely—more than two long dolman sleeves tacked together at a point slightly above the waistline. Bright cerise, topping bright purple pants, on her it looked good. In his circle it would have been considered extreme even on television.

He had brought in the makings, and asked coolly whether she would like him to fix her a cocktail or preferred to wait for Mr. Patterson.

"I'll wait," she said, then changed her mind immediately. "No, I won't. Build me one, will you, Webster? You do make the best gibson."

"I'm glad I do something that pleases you, Miss Althea," he said pointedly.

"You do many things that please me," she protested. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"You may have to find out," he warned, "if you holler at me one more time."

Chastened, she came and stood beside him. Like a nurse in a hospital movie she silently handed him the ice tongs, the stirrer, the pickled onions. It was moments like this he savored, wherein the menial aspects of his job were dissipated by the fact that he was, after all, his own man. When push came to shove he could be a tyrant, as auto-

cratic as he wished, and get away with it. These people needed him and they knew it.

He stood his ground, radiating disapproval to the woman at his side, until she put her mute apology into words. "I'm sorry," she said, and he nodded graciously, telling her they would say no more about it.

She was not content to let it go at that. "I've been snapping at people all day," she confessed. "I guess my nerves are on edge. Mr. Rutherford meant a lot to me."

"I know he did, miss." The sentence was as pregnant as Mrs. Randall, as he had intended it to be. Obviously, its over- and undertones were not lost on Althea, who looked at him sharply, whose stare he met blandly.

"Hurry with that cocktail, will you, Webster?" she monotoned. "I need it. I'm not especially happy in this room. It makes me miss him."

She turned and surveyed the scene of so many festive evenings, her slim white hand extended for the cold glass which he presently gave her. She raised it toward her lips and he saw it halted halfway, saw her hand slip around the bowl to hold it steady as she strode across the room.

She stopped in front of the chair, touched it with her free hand as if to verify its substance, as though mirages were commonplace, were likely to occur at any time of day in east-side drawing rooms.

"I didn't notice it when I came in," she said to the air. "I'm so used to its being there that I didn't instantly realize that it shouldn't be."

Like a child taking nasty medicine which she is told will be good for her, she shut her eyes and took a deep pull on the gibson.

"Webster"—it might have been Miss Hush speaking—"where did this chair come from? Who brought it here?"

"I don't know, miss," he lied. "I haven't been here all day, you know. I had to clean your place too, though I must say I didn't have time to do one of my best jobs. But if you're going to complain, complain to Mr. Patterson, not to me. He said he'd fix it with you—"

"Webster, for God's sake don't nag me," she pleaded. "I can't take it. I just can't take another thing"

She looked it. She looked right at the breaking point. She seemed to be holding her breath, her tongue, her tears, and her dessicated nerves, as if to give in now would mean no retreat ever. Her hand shook as she finished her drink. The room was so quiet you could have heard a fly land, did hear a scratching upon the hall door, did hear an imperious meow.

Webster had the door open in less than a second. With an air of "What took you so long?" Angus bounded past him, settled himself in the disputed chair like an exiled monarch returning to claim his kingdom, and glowered at Althea. She raised her cocktail glass high, unmistakably with the intention of flinging it at the cat. Something within her, decency or superstition, made her alter her aim, and the glass splintered against the floor.

"You'd better get ahold of yourself, Miss Althea," Webster cautioned kindly. "I hear the Taylors coming."

They were already there before Althea's breasts stopped heaving spasmodically, before the temper had drained from her eyes, but Bill Patterson walked in at just about that moment and in the general melee of greetings Althea's indisposition appeared to pass unnoticed.

The second gibson laced her stays.

When Webster could spare a moment from his bartending he whipped out to the kitchen for a dustpan and brush with which to sweep up the remains of the cocktail glass. Angus followed him eagerly.

"Where at you been, Angoosie?" he cooed, running his fingers along the arched spine. "Did Mrs. Taylor try to steal you away from us? Did she kill your boss just so's she could get her paws on you?"

He went down on one knee. "Speaking of paws," he said, "it looks like you're favoring the right one. Let me see it, feller.

He turned it over gently. The cat demonstrated his

respect by furling his ordinarily formidable claws. Then, as he yowled in pain, the claws splayed out again.

Not four claws. Two. The end ones only. The two that should have been in the middle were missing, and the pads to which they should have been attached were torn and crusted with blood.

Webster clucked in sympathy. "You sure must have been nervous, cutey," he said, "chawing your fingernails like that, down below the quick. If only you could talk you'd be an awful big help to me."

The cat did its best on its favorite conversational topic, mewing a comprehensible request for food.

"In a minute," Webster answered him. "Soon's I serve another pitcher of cocktails. Then I'll have to come back out here and make my thermidor, which some of these folks are going to be too drunk to taste."

He sighed ruefully. By way of consolation, the cat rubbed against his shinbone. They returned to the living room together, Webster to work, the cat to con somebody out of a caviar canapé.

Webster had just completed pouring the next round when he heard, above the desperate shoulder-to-the-wheel party talk of the amateurish host, a knock on the door. It came again, this time with such authority that Bill Patterson also heard it and stopped mid-word.

Across the threshold Webster found Mr. and Mrs. Randall. He felt a ridiculous impulse to slam the door in their expectant faces, aware that their visit would mean at best a delay of the dinner hour and, at worst, an impossible division of five lobsters seven ways. He had, however, no choice in the matter. With affable nods, the couple swept past him and was but definitely in.

David Randall, perhaps because you were looking for it, bore a distinct family resemblance to Mortimer Rutherford. He was lighter in weight, and although coming rotundity was already casting its foreshadow there was an athletic springiness about him which would probably

keep it at bay for some time. Rutherford had been gray as long as Webster had known him, but his waves had been as deeply troughed as David's, and must one day have been as brown. All over him, as his late relative had done, David bore the signs of being a member of the most outstanding family in a very small town, the air of better-than-thou, of privilege, which is imparted to even the lowliest poor relation.

In fact, he looked a little smart-alecky. Despite the fact that a few figurative hayseeds still clung to his sharply tailored tropical, he spoke with all the assurance in the world, saying, "I'm sorry to crash the party," while implying that Bill was darned lucky to have him.

"My wife wanted to see the pictures," he said. "It's the first opportunity we've had since—since—"

He backed away as if he had almost put his foot in something unpleasant. "Meet the missus." It was as though he threw a spotlight upon her. "The ball and chain, Margie Randall."

Webster saw Althea screen a smile behind her cocktail glass and readily guessed what caused it. Mrs. Randall was one of those women who indulge themselves in a needle which, though it is not illegal, should be in their cases. What she had done to the furniture in her living room she had also done unto herself this evening, slip covering her curves with a kennel of blue poodle dogs flaunting magenta ribbons. Althea, that cat, would see no further, would not raise her eyes to the pretty, dimpled face which smiled about the room as though everyone in it were a potential friend.

Bill Patterson was a remiss host. Webster took over, asking, "May I fetch you a cocktail, Miz Randall?"

"I'll have some sherry," she said heartily, "if you've got some that's sweet. I can't stand the sour kind, the—what do you call it, Davey?"

"The dry," her husband supplied, with a trace of fatuousness.

It was easy to see from where Webster stood that

whatever *savoir-faire,* whatever taste Rutherford had imparted to his kinsman had not rubbed off on the bride.

"I think Madame would prefer a little *vin rosé,*" Webster suggested, and went to the kitchen to get it.

When he returned it was to a hushed gathering, as if the spirit of Rutherford lay heavily upon all those present. In a moment he knew why as the silence was broken by a high-pitched, musical giggle from Mrs. Randall.

She was systematically, item by item, laughing at the collection of paintings. To hear her would have set Mr. Rutherford to whirling in his grave, had the poor gentleman been in one.

By the time she reached painting number twelve the tears were rolling down her cheeks. "Really, Davey," she squealed, "these things ought to be in the funny papers instead of those sobby things they print nowadays. People would die laughing."

"I'm afraid I can't agree with you," Althea snapped. "That is fine art, and extremely valuable. I'll be glad to attend to the disposal of them for you if you find them so ludicrous."

It took a full minute for that remark to seep through the gibsons, for its significance to dawn upon the Taylors and Bill Patterson. Webster himself was somewhat flabbergasted.

"The disposal of them for you?" Bill Patterson echoed, leaning on the final pronoun.

"That's what I said," Althea stated truculently, apparently wishing she hadn't. "Mortimer was David Randall's uncle."

"Cousin," the gentleman in question corrected her. "Once removed."

"Not far enough removed to please Mortimer," Althea observed captiously. "He found a lot to be desired, even though he was fortunately spared Mrs. Randall's opinion of his collection. I kept warning him to make a will—"

"How do you know he didn't?" Bill Patterson interrupted.

"I phoned his lawyer's office today," Althea said shamelessly. "Perhaps it was pushy of me, but I was naturally interested. The lawyer's on a fishing trip, wouldn't you know, but his secretary told me they positively have no will."

"She would know," David Randall put in. "I'm in that office, you know. Right off I learned that Mr. Wheeler's secretary is the person to go to for facts."

"Well, she gave me the facts right in my kisser," Althea resumed. "No will. Nary a scrap of paper. Mort had always said he intended me to have the paintings since I had helped him get many of them and it was I who arranged to have them cleaned and kept in good condition. Needless to say, I'm very much disappointed."

She was working herself up into rage number two, and while Webster regarded her with concern Priscilla Taylor seemed to be deriving pleasure from her neighbor's loss of poise. Priscilla's blue kitten eyes looked adultly feline as she murmured, "Don't be such a bum sport, Althea darling."

"Bum sport!" Althea gasped. "Have you any idea what those pictures are worth?"

"We'll have them appraised." Dave Randall took the rhetorical question literally. "I'm genuinely sorry, Miss Tamblyn. Of course we wouldn't dream of letting anyone else negotiate for their sale. The commissions will all be yours, by way of consolation."

"Thanks," Althea said bitterly. "I think we can talk business. Quite a bit of business."

"Not on week ends," David smiled archly. "I make it a practice never to talk business on week ends."

Althea walked over to the easy chair, flexed her fingers upon its winged back, leaned her weight upon them.

"Not even in exceptional circumstances?" she purred at David, outarching him, very nearly smirking. Webster stared at her in amazement, puzzled by the sudden switch of mood; one thing he had never before seen her be was coy.

David wasn't buying. "No," he said curtly. "However I'll be glad to see you on Monday. Come to my office."

Althea's near smirk drooped at the corners. "Monday it is." She yielded ungracefully. "But you come to my office. Hell, let's make it lunch. Be my guest."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Miss Tamblyn," David said emphatically. "We haven't enough to talk about to waste a whole lunch hour on it. The problem is simple: I'll get an appraiser, and you'll sell the paintings at the going agent's fee. I can't at all see what we have to discuss."

Althea gave the chair a final pat before gliding away from it toward the sofa. "Can't you?" she asked as she sat down.

Bill Patterson got up and fidgeted with the bottles with a grave expression, as though it had suddenly occurred to him to verify the labels to check whether they designated the brand he sold, lest there be any doubt about his loyalty to the firm. He looked fixedly at Althea, although his opening remarks were aimed at David Randall:

"Miss Tamblyn can get you a reliable appraiser. She knows a flock of them. Don't you, Althea?"

"Sure," said the lady. "I've got a million of them. They keep getting underfoot."

She was drunk, but determined to be drunker. She drained her glass and shoved it toward Webster, who was pouring Mrs. Randall's wine. No one had offered seats to the recent arrivals, and they seemed reluctant to get off their feet without an invitation. Webster carried the wineglass to a table at the end of the sofa opposite to Althea's.

"Relax youself, Miz Randall," he urged, plumping up a cushion. As closely and simultaneously as Siamese twins the Randalls sat down; obviously they were impervious to the hostility which filled the air and planned to make a nice long visit of it. Webster stifled a sigh for his jeopardized dinner.

"My mother was Cousin Mortimer's Cousin Mary," David announced.

"How utterly, utterly fascinating," said Althea in a

bored tone. With wavering majesty she removed herself from the now contaminated sofa to stand before the empty fireplace. Priscilla Taylor, Webster blessed her, made a point of taking the vacated place and started chattering enthusiastically to Margie Randall.

This attempt at kindliness irritated Althea. She called "Priscilla!" like a teacher who has caught a pupil chewing bubble gum. Priscilla tuned out her small talk and answered, "Yes?"

"Speaking of pictures," Althea said. "I think I've found another buyer for that Cézanne since you don't want it."

"But I do want it," Priscilla protested.

"No you don't." Teacher set her straight. "You said yesterday that you didn't."

"But I've changed my mind."

"A woman's prerogative," Dave Randall contributed brightly, and was unanimously ignored.

"There's no reason why you should keep it if you're not pleased," Althea went on. "You don't for one minute think Johnson has paid me for it in full yet, do you?"

Or that he can pay for it for some time to come, Webster thought, Cézanne being one of the names he knew and could translate into American money. He doubted whether Johnson had made that much in a year, working for Rutherford. And now, with Rutherford dead, there seemed slight chance that the agency would continue posthumously any longer than it took for current deals to be wound up

"Well, he didn't," Althea answered for herself. "I asked for only a little bit down because I needed some ready cash. The first buyer poohed out on me."

Remembering the receipt for "one Cézanne returned" he had found that afternoon, Webster thought he could supply the name of that undependable buyer, but Althea took care of the matter.

"You may have heard of him," she said sarcastically. "Mortimer Rutherford? After I'd got it for him he decided

it was too small to go with his other paintings. Therefore——"

"There's no use discussing it," Priscilla said curtly. "I've decided to keep it. As a matter of fact, it's at the framer's right now. I'm having it put into the oak frame in place of Mortimer's wedding-present portrait."

"You're what?" Althea shrieked. "But that's ghastly! The Cézanne will be lost in that frame."

"It'll look fine," Priscilla said smugly. "I picked out a very nice mat to fill in the gaps."

"A mat, yet!" Althea clapped a hand to her brow dramatically. "It's sacrilege. People have been burned at the stake for less."

Johnson Taylor looked miserable. It was easy to see that he did not approve of his wife's action, but neither was he happy about Althea's reaction to it. Priscilla tipped the scales in her favor by starting to cry. Johnson flew to her defense with, "Althea, you shouldn't expect everyone to have taste as good as yours," which well-intended remark only made Priscilla cry harder.

The Randalls were loving it, like saucer-eyed kids watching wrestling on television. Bill Patterson, on the other hand, looked as if he wished he had stood in bed. While the battle raged round him he seemed to concentrate on some worry of his own, to dwell in a solitary hell. Mechanically, he emptied a gin bottle into the cocktail pitcher, then diluted it with the merest whisper of vermouth.

Food, Webster thought, was what was needed, to soothe the ravening beasts, to gentle them down, to hoist the evening above the level of a barroom brawl. He bustled out into the kitchen, Angus at his heels, and addressed himself to the lobsters.

10

ONE OF HIS favorite magic tricks, the altering of lobsters from green to red, had been performed earlier that afternoon. They were now ruddily steeping in their liquor, for all the world as though they were guests and not victuals.

They were baby size, and Webster couldn't kid himself that there would be enough to go around. He was resigned to the fact that the Randalls would have to be fed, for any attempt to outwait them would result in the complete debilitation of the rest of the party. One half lobster thermidor would make a very acceptable entree, and he frantically searched the pantry shelf for the makings of a course fit to follow it. The choices open, baked beans or hash, presented a too precipitous plunge from the sublime to the ridiculous, and he was contemplating a quick dash to the store when he remembered a delicacy in someone else's larder.

Someone had given Althea Tamblyn a tinned pheasant, which she kept, like the Emperor Jones's silver bullet, for emergency in her bedroom closet. With a little ingenuity, and a pound and a half of wild rice, it could be easily converted into an epicurean dish for seven. There was no need to bother Althea with a request for her permission, since Webster would personally guarantee prompt replacement by Bill Patterson.

Pleased with this solution, he decided to start preparing the thermidor first and went to the kitchen drawer to get the knife with which to split the lobsters. He knew exactly which one he wanted, a fish knife with an eight-inch blade sharp as a zoot suit, so sharp that it was customarily sheathed in a wooden slot built into the drawer.

It was not there this evening. Webster pulled the drawer out further, thinking that misfortune's godchild, Bill Pat-

terson, might haphazardly have tossed the dangerous implement therein, where, presumably, it would lie in wait for Bill's next visit, whereupon it would nick him mortally.

The light was not good on this side of the room, and the back of the drawer was a jumble; Webster pulled it out that extra inch that overbalanced it, and it somersaulted to the floor with a crash. Cursing quietly, he stooped to set things right.

One by one, lining them up like cadets on dress parade, he returned the mixing spoons, the pastry brushes, the potato whips, to their rightful places, and all the knives but one. That one, the recalcitrant fish knife, was still absent from roll call.

Perhaps in its place, inadvertently left as a token, was an article which gave Webster pause. It had no niche in the drawer, and no justifiable claim to being there. Its presence amid the tangled mass of his cooking cutlery would have disgusted the fastidious Mr. Rutherford were he alive to see it; the thought that its being there had something to do with his death was inescapable.

It was an object with which Webster was thoroughly familiar, one of the innumerable side combs Althea Tamblyn scattered about like petals.

He managed to pass through the living room without attracting the notice of either antagonists or audience of the skirmish which was currently being fought. In Althea's flat, his quest for pheasant was temporarily sidetracked by a search for the missing fish knife.

If Mr. Rutherford had got it in the back, as Webster now strongly suspected, any ordinary murderer would long since have disposed of it. But if Althea, as now seemed probable, had committed murder, she would have done so in her own bizarre fashion, with a fig for the rules and a highhanded contempt of consequences. Snug in her self-assurance, it would never occur to her that suspicion might someday fall upon her. It was quite likely that the lethal instrument had been added to her own collection of

kitchen knives, its evil work done, a full life of domestic usefulness ahead of it.

It was not only likely, Webster discovered, but indisputable fact There it lay, burnished to brilliance, in Miss Tamblyn's knife box. Webster could testify that it had never lain there before.

His mind was like a subway station at rush hour, each thought shoving to get in first. He sat down at the kitchen table, tried figuratively to arrange the problem before him on the checkered cloth.

Miss Tamblyn had killed Mr. Rutherford because why? For the second time that day Webster widened a margin for error and conceded that the two might have been having an affair without his knowledge. Assuming that to be true, Mr. Rutherford's going away might really have been running away, and would sure put Miss Althea in a tizzy, especially if she thought he were running with or to another woman. Miss Althea sure wouldn't stand for anybody's beating her time and reaping the benefits. She'd stop Rutherford before he got one foot outside the door.

Webster still could not see why such a dandy would embark upon dalliance in those ratty old pongee pajamas, but an explanation for that might eventually be found. And the rest of it he could see clearly.

Althea had heard in the store Tuesday night that Mortimer was leaving town For some time she'd suspected him of cheating because of those hints which a man, however cagey, will inevitably let slip. Maybe she confronted him with her suspicions and got nowhere. So what would a woman of Althea's spunk do? She'd make a point of getting Rutherford's key off Webster's key ring on Wednesday so she could do a little investigating of her own.

Did she find proof of her lover's infidelity in his apartment? It didn't really matter. Mortimer had caught her, in his kitchen most probably, and when the fur started to fly she had instinctively grabbed the knife and let him have it.

That meant unpremeditated, but what the hell? Miss Althea had her good points, and Webster didn't really

wish to see her fry. In fact, if she got a life sentence he'd be inclined to bring her baked goods complete with hack saws on visiting days. He wanted to see justice done, but a crime of passion had a certain irresistible charm.

So, he resumed, Althea hadn't meant to do it but she did, and then that fertile brain of hers had started dreaming up ways to cover her traces. The identicalness of fireproof and nonfireproof chairs must have struck her immediately, and the method by which she could profit from their likeness. In preparation, she had dragged Rutherford's body into the living room, leaving those spots on the rug, which she had subsequently cleaned.

Bloodstains. Webster leaped to another crag. There had been bloodstains on Miss Althea's pillow slip, but that must have been her own blood, not Rutherford's. The result of cat scratches, he had thought, and now he was sure of it, visualizing Angus, in at the death, valiantly avenging his master.

It was a nearly perfect solution. One thing, only, troubled him: the chair. If Althea had stepped across the hall for her own nonfireproof chair to swap with Rutherford's, how did Priscilla Taylor come by the fireproof number he'd caught her with today? Unless—he reviewed Priscilla's remarks—she had told the truth and there actually was more than one in which an inebriated pyromaniac could safely fall asleep.

There was one way to find out, he decided, and headed toward the living room with his lighter.

His temples pounded with excitement. If this proved to be a second fireproof chair he would have passed through the limbo of doubt into the hell of knowing. When he knew, he'd have to make up his mind one way or another about the next step to be taken. His finger jittered on the wheel of the lighter.

With his entrenched regard for other people's property he chose the portion of chair arm nearest the wall, where a scorch mark, if any, would be least noticeable. He held

the flame perpendicularly; it shot out like a snake's tongue and lapped the fabric, which caught like dry weeds in autumn.

The hole widened like the shutter of a camera. Beating at it with his bare hand, Webster learned that with these chairs it was whole hog or none. Unless preventively treated, the fabric was as inflammable as oil-soaked rags, the stuffing flame-greedy. Acrid smoke was rising from the inner side of the chair arm, signaling the news that the fire had caught a foothold. He picked up a near-by vase, dumped out a half dozen long-stemmed roses, and threw the water on the chair, where it hissed and sent up billows of vapor without perceptibly quenching the fire. He ran to the linen closet to get a blanket.

Smothering did the trick in a matter of seconds. In fact, the whole sickening interval had lasted no longer than three minutes, although it had aged Webster fully fifteen years beyond the already attained social-security mark. He was simultaneously stroking a small burn on the palm of one hand and plotting an explanation to be given to Miss Althea, when the lady herself appeared in the foyer.

She could have modeled for an Alcoholics Anonymous recruiting poster. Her eyes were wild and dazed, and one of those combs was slipping toward her left cheek. He could see lipstick on her teeth as she tipped back her head and hollered, "FIRE!"

"The fire's out, Miss Althea," he said soothingly. "It did a little damage, but I'll gladly pay for fixing it."

She just kept hollering while the other members of the joyous dinner party crowded in behind her and stared at the gutted chair arm. Johnson Taylor seemed the least disorganized member of the party and he promptly assumed command. He threw open a window to air the place out, then returned to inspect the chair minutely.

"The fire's out, sir," Webster repeated calmly.

"What I want to know"—Johnson's voice was stern—"is how it ever got started."

"Ha!" Althea snorted. "I'd like to take a crack at that

jack-pot question. I think our friend Webster was snooping."

"Detecting, madame," he corrected icily.

Althea's glazed eyes came into focus, narrowed. Bill Patterson's hand, which had loosely rested on the arm of a sofa, tightened its hold. Priscilla slipped her arm about Johnson. Suddenly these four seemed sober as a Methodist choir during services. The Randalls, who had not come all the way into the room, appeared merely baffled.

"Detecting what?" Mrs. Randall queried.

Webster waited hopefully for someone to put a foot into his or her mouth, but wariness had taken hold of them all, caution had struck them dumb.

"What's all the mystery?" Margie Randall alone pursued the point. "Won't somebody please tell me? How did Miss Tamblyn's chair get on fire."

"I set it." Webster chose to confess, aware that all the evidence was stacked against him. "I was trying to check if something Miz Taylor told me is true."

Johnson looked swiftly at his wife and held her closer. She stood tense, her cheeks showing pink, a vein pulsing in her temple.

"And what did she tell you, Webster?" Johnson asked benignly, belittling the reply before it was made, forecasting its unimportance.

"She said that more than one of those four chairs had been fireproofed by mistake. I thought if that proved to be true, then what Miz Taylor did this morning wouldn't look so funny."

"What she did, Webster?" Johnson still strove to deprecate the matter but he looked a little ill. He patted Priscilla nervously; her blue eyes blinked at each gentle blow. Bill's eyes were wide and sad as he watched the couple.

In contrast, Althea had perked up considerably and appeared thoroughly to be enjoying herself. "Give, Webster," she ordered. "Quite your teasing."

"Well"—he stalled for time—"I'd been kind of won-

dering how come Mr. Rutherford's chair could catch on fire when all his other stuff was fireproof. I knew it was only an accident if he'd got stuck with the only *un*fire-proofed one, but being now and then a gambling man I was curious as to what the odds had been against it. If he had got the only one in four, then he was sho' unlucky. I made up my mind to test a couple of others.

"Like you see, Miss Althea's chair burned to beat the band. I'm sorry about that. You can take the damages out of my wages, miss."

"We'll discuss that later," she retorted. "Come on, get to the point. What happened this morning?"

He stooped to pick up the roses he had tossed upon the floor. "Miz Taylor brought a chair into Mr. Rutherford's place this morning," he muttered. "That one I couldn't set on fire."

"Darling!" Johnson might have spoken involuntarily. Priscilla looked toward her husband pleadingly. One hand was behind her back, and from where Webster knelt he saw her cross one finger firmly over another.

Her voice was low and unsteady: "I can't imagine what Webster is talking about." It faltered. "I wasn't in the Rutherford apartment earlier today. It took all my strength to go in there this evening. I'll never really like the place again."

Her eyes swung around to Webster. Help me. Help me, they implored, so stricken, so scared, like a little hurt kitten's. And he was more than half inclined to do so. But what about the consequences? He could not assist her without saying that he had lied in the first place, which would imperil his own hide, considering the color it was.

"Besides," Priscilla went on, "our chair is still in our apartment. You know that, Johnson. We sat in it tonight when you came home."

Relief flooded Johnson's face. "Of course we did, darling," he said. "I'd forgotten for the moment."

He was sincere, Webster had no doubt about it, which could only mean that Priscilla, belatedly recognizing her

folly, had bought an identical chair that afternoon in the course of her expensive taxi ride. Which, in turn, meant that Webster had absolutely nothing to go on but his own say-so. If he swore that Mrs. Taylor had brought a chair to Rutherford's and she swore she hadn't, he had no doubt as to whose shoulders the burden of proof would fall upon; it was not one of the proverbial white man's burdens. Trying desperately to think his way out of this corner, he came up with a boffola.

He burst into a Mr. Bones laugh and slapped his thigh. "That sure beats all," he chuckled. "I've been wondering why you all were acting so upset. Did I say 'Miz Taylor'? I meant Mrs. Mueller, that janitor's wife. Miz Taylor once mentioned in passing that there was more than one fireproof chair, but it was Mrs. Mueller who came dragging a chair into Mr. Rutherford's place today, the old hag. Sometimes when I'm confused my tongue goes sleigh riding."

"That Mueller woman." David Randall spoke angrily. "She ought to be fired. She takes entirely too much upon herself."

Surprised yet gratified by this endorsement from an unexpected quarter, and aware that Randall, as heir to the apartments, might be able to locate Mrs. Mueller permanently behind the eight ball, Webster hammed it up further than all the end men in the world laid end to end.

"She do, indeed," he declared, "the old busybody. I guess I hates her so much my memory just won't allow me to say her name. Please forgive me, Miss Priscilla. I'm free now to say I didn't set eyes on you until this evening."

She smiled at him like an angel, tacitly expressing her thanks.

"I'm dry," Althea said petulantly, patently disappointed that a scene which had promised drama had ended in merriment. "Clean up that mess you made, Webster," she directed, as she led the way back to the apartment across the hall.

He obeyed her, if desultorily. It now appeared that the

only chair which had ever been fireproofed, Miss Althea not having vouched for Miss Priscilla's story, was back in its original position in the Rutherford apartment. As to how it got there, there was his evidence alone, and lifelong attention to courtroom dramas indicated what would happen to that unsupported evidence. David Randall or any other young squirt of a defense attorney who had just squeaked through his bar exams could attack it profitably.

Did the witness see the defendant carrying the chair, setting it into place? No, sir, he couldn't rightly say he did. The chair had reappeared in its wonted place during the ten or fifteen minutes he'd been out of the room. Coincidentally he had found Mrs. Taylor lurking in the foyer, and how could he be sure that she hadn't just come over to borrow a cup of sugar? Well, she said she'd brought the chair over. Hearsay. Irrelevant, not to mention immaterial. Your witness, Mr. Prosecutor. Just to think of it made Webster quail.

Webster cursed the designer of this totable and ubiquitous piece of furniture, and admitted that the fireproof chair, potentially his most powerful clue, was in fact a dud. In vituperation he kicked its inflammable counterpart so savagely that it toppled over upon its side. Defiantly, he let it remain in its unseemly attitude and went pheasant hunting.

He'd have to have a little talk with Priscilla Taylor, and after the way he'd gone to bat for her she should be inclined to be cooperative. He'd figure out some way to detach her from the surrounding company.

He opened the closet in Miss Althea's bedroom. The tinned pheasant was on the uppermost shelf, partially concealed by a large flat package. He got the two-step ladder from the kitchen and climbed upon it.

The package was about card-table size, and wedged in lopsided so that he could not manage to slip the can out from under it. It was wrapped in slippery, badly torn brown paper and bound with stout cord which had been cut in two or three places and kept catching on other

articles on the shelf. With careful manipulation he managed to jockey it into a favorable position and was able to extricate the can.

"Serves eight," he read from the label, and muttered, "It's damned near got to."

In fine print there was a recipe for pheasant with béchamel sauce, which gave him an idea of how to sequester Mrs. Taylor. He was sure that she was the only one in that crowd who would know what a *roux* is. What with the turn the evening had taken he felt he could rightfully request a little kitchen help.

He didn't want to risk getting Miss Althea's back up by marching through the living room across the hall with her filched pheasant. He opened the door to the dumb-waiter shaft, reached across, and placed the can on the opposite ledge. Gratefully he observed that it fitted securely, with a good eighth of an inch to spare; otherwise it would have been necessary to haul up that old fishy-smelling dumbwaiter and pray that nobody hauled it down before he could race around to the other side and remove the tin.

The late Mr. Rutherford's living room was blue with smoke. Mr. Patterson looked awful. Webster, who felt that a domestic's duties ceased somewhere this side of holding an employer's head, hoped he would not take that one too many.

The two young married couples sat four abreast upon the sofa, Priscilla and Mrs. Randall spiritedly trying to top one another about the difficulty, albeit inevitability, of pleasing their respective spouses. Priscilla was just explaining that Johnson couldn't abide starch in his pajamas, a catastrophe which Webster had been successfully averting since long before she was even heard of, when Webster caught her eye.

"I could use an extra hand in the kitchen," he said peremptorily. "I'm just about snowed under."

"Now Davey *likes* a little starch," Mrs. Randall was finessing, until she noticed that her opponent had lost in-

"I'll help," she said eagerly. From her manner he guessed she would do anything to avoid looking him in the eye. He opened the sprung dumb-waiter door to get the pheasant, exasperatedly tried to shut it again firmly, gave up, and let it swing on its hinges as he carried the pheasant to the wall can opener.

Priscilla was at the stove, twiddling the gas knobs, lifting a lid, and sniffing at the lobsters. "What do you want me to do?" she asked, her back to him.

He brought a batch of ingredients and told her in detail how he wanted them blended. Not until he had finished and made sure she had grasped the instructions did he change the subject.

"Miss Priscilla," he then began sternly, "you sure put me in a spot over there at Miss Althea's. You very nearly called me a liar."

"You very nearly called me a liar too," she parried reproachfully.

"Ah, but that was the truth."

She nodded, conceding the fine distinction. "I'd planned quite a different lie," she said, "about the fireproof chair you caught me with. I was going to say I'd found it on the roof, but I suddenly realized that would bring the fact of murder out into the open, where we could no longer turn our backs on it. Thanks for covering up for me."

"I'll continue to do so," he promised, "if you just be a good girl, do you hear? You asked me this morning to be your friend, but friends have got to be truthful with one another. Will you answer me a few questions sincerely?"

She nodded again, and blended the flour into the melted butter.

"How was it," he asked, "that little Angus came to Mr. Patterson's party with you? He been staying over at your place?"

"Yes. Since last night. Your friend Mrs. Mueller found him wandering around in the cellar and sent him up on the dumb-waiter."

"Why did she do that?" he inquired suspiciously, instantly willing to involve his ancient enemy in a misdemeanor.

Priscilla shrugged. "I don't know. Probably because there was no one at home in this flat, naturally, and Althea was over at our place. Mrs. Mueller probably thought he should be with people who could take care of him."

She poured a little cream into the *roux* and turned the burner lower. "He'd hurt his paw," she resumed. "I put some boric ointment on it. I though maybe we ought to take him to a vet, but Althea said that if an animal was able to eat well there wasn't anything wrong with him that time couldn't cure And Angus certainly ate well. He ate all the hamburger I'd bought for our dinner.

She paused, and Webster admired the nonchalance with which she dashed in just enough salt, the optimum amount of pepper. Angus, felinely aware that he was being talked about, purred happily.

"I thought we should stay home," she went on, "just to keep him company. But Althea"—she spat the name—"insisted upon Johnson's taking me out to dinner and a movie she'd seen and thought just *too* divine, reahlly."

He could not resist a smile for her waspishness, while he hoped that none of the venom would get into the sauce. She was stirring the mixture a little too rapidly, and he ticked her wrist to slow her down.

"Sorry," she apologized "It's just that I get so mad sometimes. Althea's so capable. Johnson says she has absolute taste, as some musicians have absolute pitch. She's a whopping success in business, all this and a woman, too. When she urged us to go out last night and said that if we'd leave a key with her she'd look in on Angus from time to time, I honestly felt she thought I'd kill the patient with clumsy kindness while she would cure him with a laying on of hands."

"Miss Althea doesn't lay her hands on Angus less she can't help it," Webster remarked, "and there are plenty

other things she can't do. She's not anywhere nearly as capable as you in the kitchen, for instance."

"Occupation, housewife," Priscilla said wryly. Then her forehead puckered as she protested, "If she'd only let me be that to the best of my ability without heckling me all the time. And so often she's right. Last night she was. It was very good for me to get out of the house with Johnson after the terrible thing of finding Mortimer Rutherford. Just to get it off my mind for a minute——"

"When you found him," Webster interrupted, "was Angus anywhere around?"

"No, he wasn't." Her frown deepened. "I don't think he was in the apartment at all. You know the way he always runs to the door to greet people and see if they have brought him anything."

"Yes, ma'am, I do."

"And he was so hungry last night that I'm sure he hadn't had anything to eat for quite a while."

Webster, who had been preparing the thermidor, set the licking bowl down, encouraging the cat to make up for lost time. As he put the seven lobster halves under the broiler to brown, "How're we doing, boss?" Priscilla asked him.

"We're doing great in the culinary department." He qualified it. "Sorry I can't say the same for the detective bureau."

There was a small dab of flour high upon her right cheek. She made a comma out of it with a forefinger while she regarded him thoughtfully.

"Is it so important, Webster?" she asked softly. "I mean, Mortimer Rutherford is dead, and good riddance. Does it really matter who killed him?"

"I think it does, miss," he said intransigently. "Or, to put it another way, I don't think it matters so much who killed him as who didn't. Maybe you think I'm foolish and all that, but I just couldn't go on working for all you folks, knowing that one of you was a murderer but not knowing which one. It would be too creepy."

"I can see your point," she admitted. "And yet——"

Webster had launched himself upon a soliloquy: "What beats me is that all of you, knowing Mr. Rutherford's habits, must be as sure as me that he was murdered. But not one of you has said it out loud. Which looks like everyone is a little bit guilty, and that just don't make sense because you're all not good enough friends one to the other. I don't think you'd be likely to form a Let's Murder Mortimer Club."

"I wasn't tapped for membership," she assured him.

"I don't think anybody was. Nor do I think anybody's skirts are exactly clean enough to go casting first aspersions, to come right out and say somebody murdered Mr. Rutherford. Miss Priscilla, will you be good enough to tell me how you knew he was so drunk Wednesday night?"

She stirred the sauce slowly and lifted the spoon to let the velvety liquid drip from its tip. "Is this the right consistency?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am, it is. We can put the pheasant into it now to heat itself up. The wild rice is nearly ready. I asked you a question, Miss Priscilla."

"I know you did. I was just trying to decide whether or not to answer it." She turned and faced him squarely. "All right." She reached the decision. "I don't really know why I'm making such a big deal out of it. There's nothing to hide."

She paused before revealing the one bit of information she would have preferred to keep secret, but without which the rest of the story could not be told:

"I was alone Wednesday evening. I'm always alone Wednesdays. My husband plays handball at the club with some of his old pals."

She thought Webster's eyebrows rose questionably, and she rushed on to a statement with which he could not quibble.

"It was excruciatingly hot that evening. Do you remember?"

He nodded. Wednesday's heat had broken records dating back to 'nought seven.

"There wasn't a breath of air in my apartment," Priscilla said, "and there was the most irritating noise coming from the Randalls'."

Webster's mind snapped to attention. "Noise?" he asked. "What kind of noise?"

"The kind I find most hard to take. Hammering, sort of, but not steady. Long pauses, then a scrunch, then a ping, ping, ping." She rapped the stove edge.

Just the sounds, Webster thought, which would be made by an amateur housebreaker intent upon opening a locked closet door. "Do you recall what time that was, miss?" he asked.

"Eightish," she estimated. "It rather surprised me, because I'd had the impression that there was nobody home over there for a long time before that, since you left, Webster, as a matter of fact."

"You're so right, miss." He chuckled jubilantly. "I just hope you tell Mr. and Mrs. Randall about this. They said *I* broke down the door, and I told them Webster didn't do things like that. It must have been a sneak thief you heard."

Priscilla looked smug. "There, you see?" she said "What did I say this morning about Rutherford's having been murdered by a burglar, and you refused to believe me?"

"Let's go easy," he cautioned. "We don't know that the person in the Randalls' apartment also called on Mr. Rutherford."

"I think we may assume it," she protested. "It makes better sense than to believe that these apartments were struck by two persons, a thief and a murderer, on the same night."

"It would *take* two people to be that unresulting," he pointed out. "Entering two apartments, busting down a door in one and killing and setting fire to a person in another,

and not stealing a thing in either place. Mrs. Randall said nothing was taken from them, and I know nothing's gone from Mr. Rutherford's."

Priscilla clapped her hands together. "Webster!" she exclaimed, the blue eyes dancing. "Whoever was in the Randalls' apartment may have swapped their nonfireproof chair for Mr. Rutherford's. Try that for size."

Webster scratched his nether lip. "It just might fit." He agreed in part. "Let's mull it over in the backs of our heads. Meanwhile, you finish what you started to tell me about seeing Mr. Rutherford, Wednesday. I got to serve my dinner pretty soon."

He switched off the burners and covered every pot firmly, silently deploring the fact that his culinary art must suffer because of his bounden duty to get the story from Miss Priscilla while she was in the mood.

"I couldn't breathe in that heat," she resumed dutifully, "and I couldn't get my mind off my misery because of the banging next door. I went up to the roof, to see if things were any better up there. They weren't, but they weren't any worse, so I stayed."

She sank into a chair, motioned him to sit down, and tried to remember every detail of an incident she had endeavored to forget, tried to relive Wednesday night, the last time she had seen Rutherford alive.

Oppressive it had been, even on the roof, with no breeze from the river. She was leaning upon the parapet, staring at the still water, feeling terribly alone, as only a bride can on the night her husband is out with the boys. Johnson, who was her life, had chosen to spend this evening with others, leaving her marooned, isolated.

The footsteps she heard coming up the stairs promised some diversion; she turned eagerly and saw Mortimer Rutherford, coming not from his building but hers He was coatless, preoccupied, nervously swinging a fat bunch of keys.

"Good evening, Mortimer," she called to him, adding, "What's good about it, you well may ask."

He seemed surprised to see her, and no more pleased than generally. Nevertheless he came over, stood beside her, and made an unflattering comment about the weather. Ill at ease, as she always was with him, she made a feeble attempt at levity, moistening a finger and pointing it at the sky.

"This is a weather breeder," she declared. "It'll storm before morning."

"I hope you're wrong," he said antagonistically, as though she had tampered with the elements deliberately to annoy him. "I'm taking an eleven o'clock plane. I'd better hurry and do my packing."

He made no move to go, however. He sniffed extravagantly, remarking, "Do you smell it, the smoke from that incinerator in the new apartment building? It's worse on nights when there is no air. I'll get out an injunction"—he banged the parapet with a pudgy fist—"I'll stop them from making my life a hell."

"It's pretty bad sometimes," she agreed sympathetically, "but you get used to it."

"*You* may get used to it, my dear," he said with the manner of a princess who has just found a pea under forty mattresses, "but I never shall. With my delicate nervous system I am constantly worried lest where there is smoke, and the smell of it, there may be fire, not in the incinerator but in a more dangerous place."

He swung the keys in an arc. "These are Mrs. Mueller's," he said. "I borrowed them, and have just made a thorough tour of these two buildings, walking downstairs in mine, upstairs in yours, checking flight by flight, entering all apartments where there seemed to be no one at home, just to reassure myself that the stench was indeed coming from the incinerator and not from some forgotten cigarette."

"Did you go in my apartment?" she asked hastily, fool-

ishly concerned that it might not have been in fit condition for a visit from his worship.

"I did, indeed. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not. And the Randall-Peters' place?"

"I glanced in briefly," he said. "By the time I reached your floor I was understandably tired."

"Naturally," she said, ringing up the thought that whoever had been hammering had now gone away and it might be a good idea to return to her apartment for a few hours' sleep before Johnson's home-coming.

Mortimer sighed. "My trip is now utterly ruined, of course," he whined. "Even though I personally checked the buildings, I shall continue to worry."

He was at least bothering to pass the time of day with her, and she began to believe that he had perhaps mellowed toward her. Now might be the time, she reflected, to toss a few pitches for an improvement in Johnson's status at the office, for financial backing for Grandfather's fireproofing liquid.

"Let me help you pack," she urged. "Johnson says I'm awfully good at it. He says if you give him the MacMartin whisky account and send him to Scotland he'll take me along just to do his packing."

In no mood to take no for an answer, she led the way across the roof toward his apartment; Mortimer, protesting inadequately, followed her, then resignedly stepped ahead to put his key in the lock.

The door was open a scant two inches when Angus snaked out, his tail as fat as a fox's, a risen strand of hair along his spine. The growl came from deep inside him as he walked, stiff-legged, to Althea's door across the hall and sank his claws into the soft wood.

"Go home, you cat!" Mortimer commanded. Angus grandly ignored him and stretched his left front paw above the right on Althea's door. Mortimer scooped him up, and the back legs kicked out like a kangaroo's.

"Good cat," Mortimer cooed. "Must use soft paws with

Daddy. Daddy's going to feed his good little watch cat right away."

He seemed momentarily to have forgotten Priscilla, who followed as far as the living room, pausing to look at the paintings while he carried the cat into the kitchen.

The Picasso was crooked, and in the mood of her resolution to do favors for Rutherford so he would do the same unto her she straightened it meticulously.

"There, that's better," she was murmuring when he came back, although it wasn't quite plumb as yet. She stepped toward it again, took hold of the corners of the frame.

"Don't bother about it," Mortimer said huskily and moved to stand in back of her, not touching, *just* not touching, as certain characters do sometimes in the subway. "It's not worth it," he went on, breathing on her, a brandy breath explained by the half-full glass in his hand.

She thought she must be imagining things. It *didn't* seem possible that Mortimer had suddenly begun to care for her *that* much. She took a long step to the side and turned around.

"I'm here to help you pack, remember?" She giggled, avoided looking at him. "Let's get on with it, before you miss your plane."

"All right," he mumbled. "Come along. The stuff I want is in my bedroom."

An involuntary "Oh!" escaped her. She felt herself trembling, knew she was afraid and a fool to be; she wasn't a fluttering teenager. She forced herself to be brisk, girl-guidish, took his pudgy hand and led him to his favorite armchair—*the* chair—bade him sit in it and relax while she attended to everything.

She refilled his glass from a decanter, listened to the list of things he would need on his trip, found the dispatch case in the hall closet as he had directed, then hurried to the bedroom and shut the door, standing with her back against it a moment to still her heart. Then, hurrying

again, she selected the desired articles from the bureau and packed the case.

She was inventing specters, she kept telling herself, like a child awakened in the night, imparting dark, supernatural powers to familiar objects. However, when she returned to the living room that familiar object, Mortimer, still seemed a menace as he rose and lurched toward her. She dodged his extended arm, and he caught at the pull rope which controlled the heavy curtains that divided the room into two parts. The curtain screeched across its traverse rod. Mortimer, his elevated arm still holding the end of the cord, swayed to catch his balance. Priscilla tossed the dispatch case into the chair in which he had been sitting and ran to the door.

He ran after her. This time she knew she was not mistaken.

She was suffocating, drowning in a choppy sea of brandy which buffeted her, tugged her, rolled her around. Then the mouth, the brandy mouth, was upon hers, and from somewhere she found enough strength to beat him off.

"Johnson will kill you," she said then. "Johnson will kill you slowly and painfully when I tell him."

Mortimer, nursing the cheek she had bitten, laughed hollowly. "Johnson doesn't give a damn about you," he said. "He wanted you, and he thought he had to marry you to get you. Now it's Althea again. It's always been Althea."

She was reaching for the doorknob when he wrapped his hand about her wrist. "I want you, Priscilla," he announced. "You're so little and sweet. I could dominate you wholly, couldn't I? I could make you do anything I wanted you to, and you wouldn't do anything I didn't want. If I wasn't so drunk. Why did I have to get so drunk? Can't dominate anyone. Nobody does what I say."

He began to cry, wiping his eyes with the sleeve she had torn, and she realized that she had been insulted in spades, that Mortimer didn't specifically want Priscilla Taylor but

needed someone, anyone, to dominate at the particular moment, that he was bleeding from spiritual wounds inflicted by persons unknown, which could only be stanched by an injury to somebody else.

At that moment she had prayed she might never see him again. And she never did, alive.

She told Webster only a fraction of this, just the salient points that would satisfy his searching curiosity, about Rutherford's tour of the buildings with Mrs. Mueller's keys, about Angus's anger, her own packing of the dispatch case, and the pint of brandy Mortimer had consumed which, added to what he had already downed, was enough to make him drunker than she had ever seen him or anybody.

She didn't tell him about the pawing to which she had been subjected, nor, the most important omission of all, did she say that she had called Johnson the minute she got back to their flat, at the club where he played handball, to spill the story and to plead with him, hysterically, to come home quickly and take the taste out of her mouth.

Least of all did she tell Webster that it was almost three o'clock before she set eyes on Johnson.

11

THE DINNER WAS PERFECTION. Webster recessed long enough from the grim business of detection to permit himself to enjoy it, vicariously only at first, as frequent trips around the table with the wine bottle permitted him few visits to the kitchen and his own plate. There was sustenance for the soul, however, in the pleasure evident on all faces, save one.

The lone dissenter, or apathetic participant, was the host, Bill Patterson. Observing him more closely, Webster became convinced that he was not the slightest bit drunk,

that his distemper was of a deeper and more virulent sort. Obviously preoccupied, he ignored not only his food but his guests.

David Randall, on the other hand, was behaving as though his legacy had included the perfect-host mantle of Mortimer Rutherford. It ill became him, and Webster doubted if he would ever grow into it. He monopolized the conversation, and the only subject which appeared to interest him was the cost value of the possessions which had miraculously become his.

He seemed constantly to be taking inventory, to be weighing the silver, counting the threads in the damask. Webster half expected him to tip up the plates to inspect the hallmark.

"These glasses for instance," he continued to Althea. "How much would you say they're worth?"

"Precisely forty-two dollars a dozen," she answered sarcastically. "Plus sales tax. Which reminds me . . ."

She drew a change purse from the tapestry handbag which rested on her lap, counted out three dollars and a quarter.

"The cocktail glasses are a little cheaper. I broke one before dinner. Here."

Marge Randall tittered nervously. "Don't be silly, Miss Tamblyn," she said. "Davey's not like that at all. We're all going to be the best of friends, you'll see."

"By the way"—David spoke eagerly—"how long do your leases run?"

"Brotherrr!" Althea moaned to the ceiling. "He's going to raise the rent."

David got everybody's complete attention then. Johnson whistled. "That's right!" he exclaimed. "This makes you our landlord, doesn't it, Randall?"

Bill Patterson, whose body had been sitting there, decided to rejoin the party. "I haven't any lease at all," he said pathetically. "In fact, I haven't even got an apartment. Do you suppose——"

Randall anticipated the rest of the question and turned

serious once more. "Sorry, old chap." He shook his head. "We've got a terrific waiting list. I'll give you time to find another place, within reason, of course."

Bill's doleful eyes instantly moved to Priscilla, and Webster read the longing in them. Telling Mr. Patterson he'd have to move further away from Mrs. Taylor was like stealing his sunshine.

"But——" Bill began and paused, obviously stumped for reasons why any landlord should want him to stay. Gumption, boy, Webster egged silently; now's the time to cut this young whippersnapper down to size.

The whippersnapper was dropping a few choice names which were on the waiting list. "And," he concluded, "the law says you are not even a statutory tenant. You paid rent when you used to live over at Taylor's, but that was two months past. You were merely a guest of Cousin Mortimer's. We, of course, know why he agreed to let you freeload, but the need no longer exists."

That the "we" was not editorial Webster saw at a glance. It was, on the contrary, a might exclusive little "we," encompassing David and Bill only, leaving the others out of the know. Nobody, except Webster, seemed to care, or even notice.

"Mr. Randall," Priscilla ventured. "I should think the opinions of Bill's neighbors would count for something. We *like* having him around, and if you introduced new blood in here it might not work out too well. We're used to Bill. We'd like him to stay."

Bill was glowing with gratitude, and looked very nearly handsome. Miss Priscilla was his sunshine, Webster thought again. When she beamed upon him and he could breathe her in he became alive, if anything totally eclipsed her from him he'd wither in an hour.

"Sure," Althea crashed in raucously. "Bill's a doll. He's quite like a little mousie. However"—she waggled a finger —"he's got one or two little bad habits. He doesn't drink enough. And he's a mite too hospitable. He leaves a key under the mat, so's anyone can go and visit him when he

isn't home. Th'open door policy, that's our William."

"Can it, Althea." Bill was obviously embarrassed at being the topic of discussion. "I haven't left a key under the mat since I moved here. I used to do it when I lived with Johnson in case I lost mine. But we didn't have anything that amounted to much over there when we were batching it. Over here, where there are things of value, I wouldn't dream of it."

Althea waggled the finger again and winked at him. "There's something of value over at Johnson's now, isn't there?" she asked. "Something you'd like to steal. A small, soft, blond something."

Bill was on his feet. He looked taller than usual, and his suit seemed to fit him for the first time. His voice was steely, and surcharged with anger as he said:

"Althea, you will either behave yourself or go home." Then he sat down.

There was no-nonsense-about-it implicit in the remark which briefly stilled Althea's drunken garrulousness.

"So sorry, Billy dear," she bounced back with an attempt to mollify him. "I guess I got a little off base. I was only trying to convince Mr. Randall that you are a most desirable tenant. A *very* desirable tenant."

She reached out to stroke Bill's arm, upsetting her water glass en route. Webster, who had been crumbing the table at a snail's pace, started toward the kitchen for a cloth with which to sop up the damage.

As he passed behind Priscilla's chair he observed that the back of her neck was as red as the lobster shells Angus was now ecstatically exploring.

He thought Althea's sculptured eyebrows elevated slightly as she tasted the pheasant, but it could have been an illusion evoked by his own guilty conscience, it seeming unlikely that her palate was precise enough at this point to detect poaching upon her preserves. Otherwise the dinner was concluded without further incident, right

through the Oregon pears and *bel paese*. Surfeited, the jolly little band returned to the living room and collapsed in comfort.

With the demitasses Webster brought an unopened bottle of benedictine. As he turned the corkscrew Althea regarded him quizzically.

" 'What is a B without a B?' I always ask myself," she said. "That was a perfectly divine dinner, Webster, but I think plain benedictine's a little too sweet to top it off with. Isn't there any brandy in the house?"

"Yes, ma'am, there is," he replied, thinking, Why wouldn't there be? Mr. Rutherford would have to be dead a whole lot longer than two days for this house to be out of brandy. He had bought it as a panicky mother would buy milk for lusty triplets, in chronic fear of catching up to the last drop.

It was its unavoidable association with the departed master that had made Webster squeamish about serving that particular liquor this evening, especially in the inhalers which had virtually been their owner's trade-mark, so much so, in fact, that one tastefully encased in silver might fittingly serve as an urn for his ashes. Althea, less sensitive, elected to have hers straight.

"Divine," she stated unequivocally after her first sip. "If that Napoleon didn't do anything else that amounted to a darn, he sure made lovely brandy." She turned to Priscilla. "About that Cézanne," she harked back. "I'm willing to give you a small profit on Johnson's down payment. If you'll just tell me what framer's it's at, I can pick it up tomorrow."

"What I want to know"—Bill spoke querulously—"is how a proletarian like Johnson comes to be a purchaser of fine art. You don't buy that stuff with box tops. Come on, Johnson, tell us how you got the dough."

Webster, too, had a certain amount of curiosity about that matter, but there was no valid reason for his remaining longer in the living room at this time. Moreover, from

the way that Johnson was resisting the overture there seemed little likelihood that he would answer promptly, or even accurately. Reluctantly, Webster left to eat his dinner and clean up the kitchen.

As he ate, although he would have preferred solely to enjoy himself, he could not deflect recollections of the story Priscilla had told him the last time he sat at this table. He believed that story, while remaining aware that it might have an as yet unpublished sequel. Perhaps the further adventures of Priscilla Taylor would tell of a second trip across the roof.

There was no way to check her facts. She hadn't left herself with the vestige of an alibi, had, in fact, generously provided alibis for certain other persons. The Randalls were out—at the theater on Rutherford's tickets, which Margie had mentioned that afternoon. Johnson Taylor was playing handball at his club, the name of which was on the tip of Webster's tongue and would come to him when he needed it.

As for the others, Bill Patterson was in Washington. Althea's whereabouts were unknown, but wherever she was it was to be assumed that she could produce corroborating witnesses when required, she being a girl who misliked solitude and never deliberately indulged in it. But silly little Priscilly had confessed to being alone, save for the man who could not gainsay her, and had therefore left herself wide open.

Bill, Webster reflected, would have torn his own tongue out unhesitantly had he known what a spot he put Miss Priscilla in by vowing he'd never left a key under Rutherford's mat. Why had he said it? Maybe because it was true, maybe to reassure David Randall that his newly acquired collection would not be flagrantly open to the public while Bill was in residence.

And what about David's implication that he knew why his deceased cousin had suffered his house guest so long, if not silently? There was a teaser which had always baffled Webster. Rutherford had griped endlessly, but although

he was in the driver's seat he had not made a move to oust the unwanted hitchhiker.

Next question, he thought crossly. One I can answer. He decided to broaden his base of operations after the clean-up job was done, at least to the extent of adjourning to Althea's apartment, where he could use the phone.

The pots and pans could stand a little soaking, he gauged when he came to them. He rinsed and dried his hands, then reconnoitered briefly in the living room, emptying ashtrays and scavenging for a few scraps of pertinent conversation. The general debate at the moment, however, concerned the relative merits of various television programs, and TV's strictly intramural color question, which he found less than burning.

If he were ever seriously to take up the business of detecting, he realized, he'd have no need of disguises, being equipped, as it were, with a built-in beard and mustache. When he wasn't doing something which vitally concerned these people they did not see him. He did not exist. In a way, if you were inclined to make a joke out of it, his coloring was protective. If Webster set fire to a chair, just to see if it would catch, he was perhaps considered eccentric, but what can you expect? and, besides, good servants are so hard to get nowadays.

He was sure they regarded him as a character, but as one to whom they were eager to cleave, in spite of all his idiosyncrasies. Quite conceivably he could have got away with murder had his impulses tended in that direction; his determination not to let one of them do just that would have astonished them.

Inside this cloak of immunity, as effective as one of the invisible variety, he managed to walk out of the front door without disrupting the conversation and re-entered Althea's flat. He went to an inner room and got the Classified Directory, opened it to "Clubs," and began forced feeding of his memory as to the name of the organization to which Johnson Taylor belonged. After a while its listing caught

his eye. It was the Publicist Club, at 47 Park Avenue. He dialed the number and, stabbing in the dark, asked for the waiter captain or chief steward.

He knew that in clubs of this sort those positions were likely to be held by Italians, Frenchmen, or Negroes. If the latter in this instance, it would be someone with a background similar to his own and that of many friends of his, the apprenticeship in Florida East Coast hotels, Saratoga in its heyday, Point Pleasant, the dining cars of crack trains. It would be, in short, someone who spoke his language.

"Morrison speaking. Good evening," said a velvety voice without a trace of Latin accent, and Webster felt the ground firm beneath his feet.

"How are you, Mr. Morrison?" he asked cordially. "This is Webster Flagg I buttle for Mr. Johnson Taylor, who belongs to your club. Do you know him?"

"Indeed I do." The chuckle that accompanied the statement was highly provocative.

"You very busy at the moment?"

"No, I'm not. Dinner's about over."

"Man, you're living," Webster said admiringly. "The dinner I served was over an hour ago, but *I* had to wash the dishes."

"That's the truth. I sure am Mr. Upstairs. What's on Mr. Taylor's mind?"

"It's not on *his* mind," Webster confessed. "I need to know something, if he played handball at your place last Wednesday evening."

"We don't give out that kind of information with promiscuousness." Morrison clammed up.

Webster searched the corners of his mind for credentials, came forth with the names of three men revered in the other's profession, going so far as to call the most venerable by his nickname, Hambone—blasphemy from any but a close friend.

Morrison's silence was the most unimpressed he had ever

heard. "We're buddies," Webster assured him. "Known them for years."

"But I don't know you," the steward said coolly. "What did you say your name was?"

"Webster Flagg. *F-l-a*-two *gs*."

A pause. "The actor?"

"Yes." Webster sighed in relief.

"I've heard of you." The tone had thawed. "Happy to know you. How is good old Hambone?"

"Fine, when last I saw him. One of these nights the three of us must get together. But, in the meantime, would you tell me if Mr. Taylor played handball this week like he always does on Wednesday?"

Morrison's chuckle exploded into a guffaw. "Man, are you ever wrong!" he exclaimed. "What that Taylor boy plays on Wednesday ain't nothing like handball. Nothing at all."

He stopped laughing and was serious again as he said, "I hope I'm right in trusting you, Mr. Flagg. I stand to lose my job if you let on I told you."

"I stand to lose *my* job if you just say I asked you," Webster pointed out. "We're in the same boat, and I stepped into it first."

Morrison was either convinced or felt the gossip too toothsome to keep. "Well," he began, "Wednesday nights and weekends we permit ladies in the dining room. Mr. Taylor used to take advantage of that fact before he got engaged, then married, with a tall brunette lady named Miss Tamblyn."

Webster was way ahead of him. It had seemed odd that a new bridegroom would waste a weekly evening on handball, but the insult to Priscilla, it appeared, was even more barbed.

"You mean they started it up again?" he asked indignantly.

"That's right. We had the little blond one a few times while they were courting, then once or twice after the

"You sure?" There was disappointment in Morrison's tone. Webster realized that he had probably shared his gossip so lavishly in the hope of adding to the tale, casting his bread upon the waters in the hope that it would come back sopped in gravy.

"There's nothing I can tell you right now, I'm sorry to say," he said sincerely. "Thank you for your time. If anything happens I'll let you know. Goodnight, Mr. Morrison. I'll keep in touch."

Following his accustomed pattern, his first emotion upon hanging up was pity for Miss Priscilla, whose wedding ring had not had time to cool before she was being two-timed. Then he recollected that infidelity was possibly not the worst sin in which Johnson Taylor could have indulged that evening after dinner; murder had also been on the menu.

Before returning to finish up the night across the hall he rectified the result of his earlier display of temper. The toppled chair, lying on its unburned side, put Miss Althea's whole room out of kilter. As he set it to rights he noticed that charred particles of stuffing were dusting out of the burned area and determined to put a stop to it.

He went to the kitchen linen drawer, to get a towel which could be pinned over the hole tidywise, as in the Pullman cars. A few seconds after he turned on the light back there he became aware of a peremptory meowing, alarmingly loud.

He knew the acoustical quirks of these apartments, knew that several spots were like live microphones beamed at the neighbors. But at no point should Angus's unmistakable voice sound that loud. Unless the darned fool cat was where he had no right to be.

Opening the dumb-waiter door, Webster found his worst fears confirmed. Mr. Rutherford's balky door having been left open, Black Angus insistently stared across six stories of open shaft.

"Go back, you cat," Webster said gently, trying to keep

the sympathetic vertigo out of his voice. Angus mewed imperiously, hunching his shoulders and wiggling his hips as he gauged the jump.

Webster stretched his long arms and torso across the shaft and shoved with all his might. Miffed, looking as if he had been betrayed by one of his generals, the cat fell into the kitchen opposite.

"You call that a fall?" Webster disparaged it as he darted toward Miss Althea's closet. "You just wait and see the fall you get if I don't fix it so's you can't."

He looked for, and found, a wire coat hanger, the kind on which cleaners send home clothes, but not before he received a smart blow from that dratted package Miss Althea had perched on the top of the closet. It crashed to the floor, and he let it lay there for the time being while he raced back to the dumb-waiter, straightening the hanger as he went.

By the time he got there Angus had once more resumed his position and determined stance on the opposite ledge. Once more Webster abruptly dissuaded him, and was this time able to draw the door shut with the hooked tip of the coat hanger. He heard a mew of indignation, muffled now, and foresaw the difficulty of rewinning the affection of a disaffected Angus. The little beast, at the moment, seemed very dear to him, and he hoped to be able to convince him that the assault had been for his own good, in spite of the ill regard in which people's judgment is held by cats.

Webster had a peeve of his own. That package, which had twice caused him trouble, had virtually attacked him of its own free will. He picked up the ungainly thing and heard something within its torn wrapping slip down and thought irritably, if illogically, that it would serve Miss Althea right if he had broken it. Such a place to leave anything! With a sigh deploring Althea's slipshod habits, he found a berth for the thing under her bed, where he and it both would be free from mutual peril.

The deferred task of pinning the towel on the chair was rapidly accomplished. The bandage didn't make it look

very pretty, but would at least keep it from dirtying up the rest of the room until proper repairs could be made.

Upon closer inspection he wondered whether repairs were advisable. The back legs were more gouged up than he had ever noticed them to be, and there were little flakes of red stuff in the cracks. Real beat-up, it looked. Maybe Miss Althea better treat herself to a new one, seeing as how she had chairs like that to burn.

He stumbled over that last thought, then returned to inspect it as though it were something in the street which had tripped him. Then, impulsively, he laughed out loud.

He was still chuckling as he crossed the hall, wondering, Did she, truly? "Like I said"—he could hear himself quoting himself in the not too improbable future—"Miss Althea had chairs like that to burn, and, brother, that's just exactly what she did."

12

ANGUS WAS RESERVED to the point of huffiness when Webster returned to the kitchen next door. To mollify him, the man kept up a running commentary while he washed the pots and pans.

He was drying the next to last saucepan when Margie Randall walked in. She looked tired, remarked that it was way past her bedtime, and said they'd be going home soon.

"Webster, I don't feel *right about things*," she complained.

He looked at her searchingly, wondering if she was on the brink of some statement about the murder. "What sort of things, ma'am?" he prompted cagily.

She made a vague gesture which appeared to cover a lot of territory. "The way everybody's acting," she announced. "In the town I come from a funeral is a very important thing. In fact, back there what's going on to-

night would be called a wake. But here"—she shrugged—"nobody seems to be paying any attention to Mortimer Rutherford."

He regarded her with more than a trace of mockery. She had the decency and, being a redhead, the ability to blush.

"Oh, I know I'm not sorry he's gone," she frankly admitted. "I said plenty harsh things about him this afternoon. But it seems so unkind not to make a little more *fuss* over his death, even if it's a hypocritical fuss. I don't believe any special plans have been made for the funeral. It all seems so *cold.* It's just been left to the undertaker, and my husband wasn't even consulted. Cousin Mort's office made the arrangements.

"I don't know what people will think." She revealed her chief point of concern. "Davey's perfectly wonderful about most things, so understanding, but I just can't make him see the importance of those extra little touches that make a funeral. When people find out that he is the only living kin they'll think it's funny that he didn't put on more of a show. There's nothing worse than an impersonal funeral," she summed up, with the air of one who has studied the subject exhaustively.

"I could sing a little spiritual or two," Webster volunteered. "That would dress it up a bit."

"Oh, would you?" she begged. "It would help a lot. But the reason I came out to talk to you was I was thinking about funeral meats. We always had them back home.

"I thought it would be nice to let the people at the service know that they were welcome to come back to the deceased's nearest relative's house for a bite of lunch. Since there's to be no trip to a cemetery, it would give people something to do afterwards, instead of having it all end with a dull thud."

It was a rural custom, Webster thought, which might astound some of Mr. Rutherford's city-bred acquaintances, might seem to smack more of celebration than of mourning. To them the young Randalls might seem to be gloat-

ing over their good fortune and wasting no time before spending their newly acquired means. But she was so in earnest, so sure that she was doing the right thing, that it was not in his heart to discourage her. In due time, she would learn the facts of cynicism from someone else, but Webster was not the man to put such ideas in her innocent head.

"What I'd like," she said, "is for you to come and cook lunch Dinner tonight was marvelous. I hadn't known you did things like that, and it had seemed that the lunch thing would be too much for me to swing alone. There won't be much cooking, of course. Just serving, and carving, and making a salad, maybe."

And mixing cocktails. Webster made a mental note. Mr. Rutherford's funeral was just bound to build up an awful thirst.

"Do you want me to do the ordering also, ma'am?" he asked. Her eyes glowed at this tacit acceptance of her proposal.

"That would be wonderful," she approved. "Just cold stuff, I'd think, but suit yourself."

He scratched his head thoughtfully. "Means I've got to get up pretty early and bring it to your house before the funeral, if you want me to sing," he said dubiously.

"I know it does," she commiserated. "But I do want you to sing. I bet you sing just fine."

"That I do," he conceded, then answered her coaxing smile with one of reassurance. "It'll take some doing, but I'll do it," he promised. "I'm about finished up here, so I can go home and get me a good night of sleep."

"Thanks," she said heartily. "I'll expect you in the morning."

He followed her into the living room to check on the ice supply. It was a little below the safety level, so he brought another trayful of cubes. As he emptied it into the thermos bucket he heard the Randalls making their farewells and urging everyone to join them for lunch the next day.

"Webster's going to cook it for me," Margie said facetiously, "so don't think you'll have to eat hardtack bride's biscuits. Though I'm not so bad, am I, Davey?"

"There ain't a finer can opener in the world," he defended staunchly.

She pushed him affectionately. Althea, ostentatiously stifling a phony yawn, asked, "Must you go, reahlly? Don't let me keep you."

The sarcasm slid off Margie, who said, "I especially want for you to come, Miss Tamblyn. Just wait till you see the darling slip covers I've made for the furniture you bought. They make everything look so much *homier.* You'll love them."

This ought to be good, Webster thought, turning to watch Althea's face as she learned of her client's *lèse-majesté.* He expected indignation, was surprised to see instead almost a look of pleasure.

She gave David a long, quizzical gaze before she replied to his wife: "So you covered all the furniture, did you, dear? How cute of you! When did you do it?"

"Thursday. Davey gave me the money early that morning to go downtown and buy the material because he knew how I'd been wanting to cheer the place up. I knew it was stylish, of course, the way you'd done it, but to me it was just depressing."

If Webster had ever heard fighting words, these were the heavy artillery, but the serenity of Althea's smile remained uncracked.

"I'd love to come tomorrow, honey," she drawled sweetly, "but only on one condition, that your husband breaks whatever other appointment he has and lunches with me on Monday."

"I'll use my influence," Margie said cheerfully.

David laughed bombastically. "All right, girls, you've sold me." He gave in. "What can a poor male do?"

"Good," Althea said, her smile broadening. "It's a date."

"Please feel free to bring anyone from the funeral who

would like to come," Margie urged. "We have room for any friend of Cousin Mortimer's. It's going to be open house."

"Glad you warned me," Althea quipped, the wonted tartness edging out the sugar in her tone. "I'm sensitive to drafts. I'll wear a shawl."

And a trick up her sleeve, Webster thought as he left the room She was up to something that boded no good for the Randalls, that much was clear.

Was it just that she couldn't keep her fingers off a happy marriage, the way some people can't pass up fresh paint?

13

IT HAD BEEN his custom when he served at evening parties for Mr. Rutherford to turn down the master's bed before he left, and he saw no reason not to bestow this amenity upon Bill Patterson. He went into the small chamber which had been a guest room before it acquired a seemingly permanent lodger.

Mr. Rutherford had rarely entertained overnight guests, and must often have regretted the very existence of that spare room after he let Patterson usurp it; its condition would have been a source of constant irritation to anyone of a meticulous nature. Bill's clothes were never quite straight on their hangers. His dresser top was always littered with numberless papers and odd objects one would expect to find only in the pockets of an acquisitive small boy. Bill *kept* things.

Webster once, way back at the beginning of their relationship one day when his halo wasn't fitting well, had swept all this impedimenta into a fair-sized box topped by a note which read: "Not one scrap of paper or card or junk thrown away. In this box—all letters, papers, mis-

cellaneous stuff from man's dresser, so's I can dust it. Every piece intact. Webster." Things had been under control for a couple of weeks after that, but had inevitably drifted back into the old disorganized state, and he had thenceforth allowed the dust to accumulate.

Passing the litter tonight, he gave it the sidelong glance which was the only contact he usually permitted himself, rolled his eyes heavenward as he always did at the sight, then remembered a glimpse of something he would be needing. Perched on a sheaf of timetables was the ball of twine he'd use to wrap up Bill's paint-spoiled suit. The shears, which he would also need, were near by, open, bound around with some of the string.

As he undid the snarl he mumbled in exasperation. Where the scissors had lain was a prime example of the sort of thing anybody but Mr. Bill Patterson would have thrown away. It was the cardboard part of a book match cover, neatly accordion-pleated to the width of about a quarter of an inch, evidently done in a moment of nervousness, preserved now among the dusty archives.

There were several lengths of string fouled together, jammed between the blades. They were moist, which made them almost impossible to unknot. Why would anyone want five or six pieces of string thirty inches long?

The query struck pay dirt way down deep in Webster's consciousness, staggering him, striking sorrow into his heart. He leaned against the dresser for a minute with his eyes closed, then opened them and began to look around for other things which would be there if he had found the proper answer.

They were there, all of them. String cut thus (he held it in his hand) was sometimes soaked in perfume (there was a large, gaudy bottle of it back toward the mirror), then secured by a thumbtack (a card of them was a finger's length away) and burned, to cover up a much more strictly forbidden fragrance, the all-pervading, wistaria-haylike scent of marijuana.

He shook his head, thinking poor Bill, poor old Mr. Bill Patterson.

Webster knew, and loathed, all the tricks, all the subterfuges that went with smoking marijuana, as well as all the sorry results. He'd waged a one-man war against it at every opportunity because he'd seen what it did to kids, nice kids, who went after kicks and missed everything else. And here, right under his nose, a man he worked for——

Maybe I'm wrong, he thought charitably. But there wasn't a chance of it. In fact, he realized he should have guessed the truth several minutes earlier, should have suspected that the accordion-pleated cardboard wasn't just accordion-pleated cardboard. It was what a tea blower calls a "crutch," a holder which enables him to smoke a butt down to the very end. He picked it up, opened it; inside was all the proof he needed. It was the remnant of a reefer, shorter than a thumbnail, scorched as was the cardboard around it, dry, slender, and evil. It made him feel so sad about Bill he could have cried. Poor Bill. Poor old Bill. He'd lost his girl. He didn't have a home. All he had was this, and this was nothing.

He didn't look the type. Webster would not have thought him brave enough to monkey around with anything so potentially dangerous. Some of Mr. Rutherford's other friends, more sophisticated, were less timid. Mr. Rutherford himself, who had liked to keep his house well stocked with expensive dainties even if he did not indulge in them personally, had once asked Webster if he knew a source in Harlem from which the real fine stuff could be obtained.

That was around Christmas time, and Webster had been shocked by his employer's saying he thought a couple of sticks would be nice for those difficult people on his gift list who had everything. But, whatever the season, goodwill or no, Webster refused to have any part of such traffic He had emphatically denied knowing anyone who could fill the bill. Actually, he had a nodding acquaint-

ance with a pusher, a well-known character who ran an elevator in the building where Mr. Rutherford's lawyer had his office. But mum had been his word.

He crossed the room, clucking at the state Bill had managed to get into since returning from Washington that morning. The scrap basket was crammed to overflowing, and he emptied it into an unfolded newspaper, having to stretch to retrieve an empty cleaning-fluid bottle which spun in a lazy circle.

A possible utilization of its contents became apparent as he folded back the bedspread, upon which something had been spilled, bleeding the color, spotting the Hudson's Bay blanket beneath with dirty maroon. He bent over and sniffed deeply. Cleaning fluid it was, faint but unmistakable. A clumsy attempt had been made to remove a stain, as had been done to the rug in the hallway leading to the living room. Only, these spots were on Mr. Patterson's bed, just where a man's heart would have been if he'd been lying sidewise with his head upon the pillow.

Mr. Rutherford had been a great lyer-downer. When at home, if he wasn't sitting in the easy chair which had been the death of him, he was usually horizontal. He might have come into Bill's room Wednesday night to discuss something and flopped down on top of the bed. Only, Bill was in Washington, Wednesday night.

Or was he? How could you tell? The only things that seemed to indicate that he was there were his say-so and an alleged telegram which had been telephoned to Priscilla Taylor, of which Western Union had no record.

What if he had come home that night, believing like the others that the proprietor of the apartment was to be absent? Mr. Rutherford, of all people, would not have relished the discovery that he had a little tea pad in his home.

To use the phrase strictly literally, he sure would have been burned up when he found out.

The Taylors and Althea were in a huddle with their host when Webster went in to hit him for his wages. They were grouped before the paintings, in which Bill was exhibiting an unwonted interest. Webster cleared his throat and beckoned to him.

While Bill counted out the money, Althea was offering to give the other three a lift to the funeral chapel the next morning.

"Too bad I haven't got room for those delightful young Randalls"—she mugged—"but unfortunately my car can't seat six."

"Can it take five?" Priscilla asked. "Because I've been thinking about not going to the funeral."

"Honey!" Johnson exclaimed. "You must go. Mortimer was a close friend of ours. He was my boss."

"I know," Priscilla admitted. "But I thought I'd go out and have lunch with Grandfather. I'm worried about him. I was out there this afternoon and couldn't find him. Mrs. O'Mara told me he's got some hidden-away laboratory in which he works all day. I've got to find out where it is, what it's all about."

Bill had counted out four unearned dollars and was starting to add a fifth when Webster stopped him.

"Just change for the carfare, Mr Bill," he said, taking what was coming to him, "and that will do it."

Johnson was still arguing that it would look mighty strange if his wife didn't attend Rutherford's final rites with him; by the time Bill had tracked down an elusive nickel, Priscilla had yielded.

"All right," she said reluctantly, then brightened. "Maybe you'll go out to Brooklyn with me on Sunday and find out what he's doing?"

"I doubt it," Johnson said pettishly. "I hate to waste a Sunday trekking over to Brooklyn. Why don't you let the old boy keep his secrets?"

"Because," Priscilla tried to explain, "it isn't good for him to be somewhere alone, without a telephone, con-

ducting heaven-knows-what dangerous experiments.

"Bill knows *where* the place is, Mrs. O'Mara told me. Do you know *what* he is doing, Bill?"

"What?" Bill asked numbly, and solemnly handed the five dollars overpayment to Webster.

This time Webster took it, earmarking it for the poor box. It was simpler than trying to penetrate into Mr. Patterson's meandering mind. In fact, all the minds in this room, save his own, seemed to be busily occupied elsewhere.

Nobody responded to his goodnight.

14

WHEN HE ARRIVED home he futzed around for a while with the notes he had written the night before, reading with the amused indulgence of a grown man toward a composition written in childhood.

The Webster Flagg of last night, he now could see, had been overconfident, sure that he could whip the daylights out of this thing with one hand tied behind him, that all he had to do was to go downtown and start detecting. But it hadn't worked out that way. Sure, a lot of things had happened today and he didn't believe that many of them had escaped his notice, but they all tended to murk up the situation rather than clarify it.

The trouble was that everybody had tried to get in on the act; Priscilla with her chair-toting; Johnson with the sudden affluence which permitted him to invest in high-priced art, not to mention his clandestine shenanigans with Althea; Bill's peculiar taste in cigarettes. The Randalls, who had been unknown quantities the night before, now looked powerful important in the picture As for Althea, she had behaved like a bitch kitty all day and was as jumpy as a firecracker.

Any one of them could have done it, too. They'd all had the means and the time. Mr. Rutherford, with his constant harping upon death by burning, had virtually provided the method. It was a free-and-equal murder, in which everyone had access to Webster's key, to a duplicate chair, and to a teeninechee li'l ole box of matches.

"T'ain't easy, bub," he colloquialized to the air and his own weary self. Then, after a moment in which his thoughts collided in his head like Dodgem cars, he grinned. "Webster, you is just tired." He paraphrased Miss Pearl Bailey and headed for his bed.

Being of impeccable conscience and healthy constitution, he was ready for the alarm when it rang at seven o'clock He chose his apparel carefully, to be a credit to Mr. Rutherford's funeral: pin-striped pants, which would look as well under a white coat at the Randalls' party, and a Prince Albert, to which he had become fanatically devoted during the run of one of Mr. Belasco's shows. Upon his head he cocked a black homburg which Bill Patterson had bought to please some girl before he met Priscilla, though he should have had better sense since neither girl nor hat was right for him.

It being Saturday morning and so far uptown Webster got a seat on the subway, and when he graciously yielded it at 125th Street to a cute little light tan chick she smiled cordially, and did not say, "No, thank you, Gramps," as an ill-mannered minx once had done He was in a fine mood, in spite of the day's grim business, as he strode into the neighborhood store and claimed the sweetest ham they had in stock.

From his breast pocket he took a scratch-pad. The sheet on which he blueprinted the rest of Mrs Randall's luncheon bore the legend: *From the desk of Motamer Rutherford* The unfortunate printer had been given a hard spelling lesson, and Webster had received a lifetime supply of shopping pads.

When his ordering was completed and the goods had

been packed into a carton, he histed this upon his shoulder, where it would have clashed with his fine clothes save that Webster had a way of carrying such things off triumphantly. As he passed the liquor store on the corner he shouted an alert to the clerk, apprising him that one Mrs. Randall would presently call up for a few drinkables, that she was to be given everything she requested, and promptly.

When he entered the S. S. Rutherford apartments, Mrs. Mueller was making an awful racket in the basement. The door at the top of the cellar stairs was open, and he could hear her muttering gutturally what were surely Low German swear-words. Sniffing in distaste, he realized that someone must have squawked about the fish smell, which she was now vainly trying to drown in a cheap disinfectant.

The thought of Mrs. Mueller's being engaged in this unequal counterattack added a grace note to his day, and he could not resist taking a bird's eye view of her labors. He peered down into the dark and, as his vision became adjusted, beheld Mrs. Mueller, not industriously scrubbing as he had hoped but loafing in an armchair.

As he watched, marveling at the complacency of the woman which could permit her to lounge about in such unsavory surroundings, she stood up and started to carry the chair toward the stairs. As she walked she and her burden were briefly illuminated by a shaft of light streaming through a broken pane; the instant was long enough for Webster to get a good look at both of them. In Mrs. Mueller's appearance he had not the slightest interest. But the chair! The chair fascinated him.

"Where did you get that?" he shouted.

Mrs. Mueller jumped. "I might have known it was you," she whined, "sneaking up on people and frightening them."

"Where did you get that chair?" he demanded, racing down to it, touching it to prove its reality.

It was real, all right, and identical with all the others

on the sixth floor, at least in appearance. He reached for his cigarette lighter.

"I found it," Mrs. Mueller was explaining. "Somebody must not want it any longer. It was 'way in the back of the coalbin, and I had a hard time brushing it. I can use it by my place. Hey, it's mine now. What're you doing to it?"

"Nothing," he said, truthfully enough. He hadn't been able to do anything to it, the lighter's flame having proved powerless. This, indubitably, was another fireproofed chair, and Miss Priscilla had been right about there being more than one. This, conceivably, was the very one that used to stand in Mr. Rutherford's living room, before someone with arson in mind stashed it in the cellar.

"I think you'd better leave it here for a while, Mrs. Mueller," he said calmly. "It may be that it belongs to one of my folks."

"Then why would they put it in the coalbin?" she challenged.

"If they wanted to do it," he said, "I don't see that they didn't have the right. The cellar belongs to the tenants You just leave that chair alone."

She spluttered indignantly and turned her back. He picked up the chair and carried it to the bin. It was dark in there If Mrs. Mueller had not been on a snooping spree, this certainly relevant bit of material evidence might not have turned up until months after Rutherford's death.

At the moment Webster wasn't sure whether its appearance simplified his own deductions or further complicated them.

He was humming reflectively as he entered the Randall flat. Margie Randall, wearing a house coat trimmed with marabou, was feverishly whipping together a gaping seam in one of her slip covers.

She said, "Good morning," and then the phone rang and she said, "My goodness, if that's her again I'll scream.

I really will. Ten times she's called, if she's called once. And poor Davey's trying to get some sleep."

The speech had carried her to the telephone. Webster, following with the carton on his shoulders, was about to pass her when she laid a detaining hand upon his arm, shook her head, indicated that he should wait.

"Miss Tamblyn!" She crowded the name into the phone, which seemed already to contain Donald Duck. "If you would once give me a chance to tell you, he's here. He just arrived."

Webster made a move to take the phone away from her, but she only shook her head more vehemently and bent away from him.

"Yes, I will send him right over," she promised Althea. "I told you before that I would. Now please don't call me again." She banged the phone down and stuck her tongue out at it.

"Whew!" she breathed. "Is *she* in a state! You better go right over and see what's eating her."

"I've got to put my perishables away first," Webster said conscientiously, tapping the carton.

"They can wait. If you don't go right away, she'll call again."

"And I told the liquor man you'd be telephoning an order." This was plainly stalling. He'd not be next door long, whatever was afoot. Might as well get it over with. And yet, Miss Althea in that kind of mood was something to postpone.

The telephone started up again and Margie had it in her hand before the first ring was over. "He's on his way," she said firmly, and hung up.

And then he *was* on his way, the day gone suddenly sour. He couldn't rightly think what Miss Althea had on her mind. At the moment, as he crossed the roof, he could not recall having committed a major transgression against her the day before. True, he'd burned her chair, but that was over and done with and she wouldn't be likely to wake up mad all over again about it the next

morning. Also, he'd borrowed her tinned pheasant, but she'd had herself a fine meal off part of it, and it wasn't irreplaceable anyhow.

She was waiting for him in the center of the living room. Her dressing gown was on wrong side out and her hair was flying wild. She didn't have a scrap of make-up on and her face was white as a sheet and her eyes looked like two holes cut into it, which made him think of a Klansman and he got real scared and wondered what *had* he done wrong or what could she pin on him.

"Where is it?" she screamed, making for him with her hands raised. Her sleeves rolled back and he saw deep scratches on her forearms, puckered, sore-looking.

"Where is what, Miss Althea?" He was glad his voice sounded controlled.

"You very well know what"

"No, ma'am, that I don't. If you'll just quiet yourself down a little and tell me what you've lost, I might be able to help you find it."

Her hands, still in the air, shook aimlessly, then she dropped them to her sides. She hadn't wanted to play the scene this way, he could see She'd just got herself all worked up while she waited in the wings.

"Webster," she said presently, through stiff lips, "I know that you took it."

She looked crafty now, not formidable, and he lost his atavistic fear of her. This was just Miss Althea Tamblyn, who had a vicious temper but no mob behind her. She was not going to push him any farther than he cared to go. He knew she was in the wrong.

"Webster, what was that you served for dinner last night?" she asked, and he wondered if she could be so petty-minded, so lacking in a sense of proportion as to inflate a little neighborly larder filching into grand larceny. She must be out of her mind.

"It was pheasant, ma'am," he said calmly. "That canned pheasant you've been saving. I'll see to it that Mr. Patterson gets you one back."

"I don't care about that," she snapped. "What I want to know is what you did with the thing that was on top of it."

"The thing?" he echoed. "Oh, that package."

He drew himself up tall, self-righteously. He had her where he wanted her now, and the sparring in the dark was over. When he had answered her fully her temper would topple like a baby's building blocks, she'd be ashamed of herself and come crawling for forgiveness.

"I put it where it would be safe," he said with the maximum of martyrdom, "instead of all crookedy in the closet like you had it. It's under your bed."

She ran into the bedroom and he followed her sedately. When he got there she had already drawn the flat package from beneath the bed and was bowing over it, patting it gently and sort of crooning.

Webster knew he was a bit of a ham, a tendency which he mistrusted and usually tried to curb, but this was too good an opportunity to miss. He wanted to push her to the lowest level of humility for her misjudgment of him.

"I only put it there for your own good." He gloated. "I think it had already got itself a little mite broken before I moved it."

"Oh my God!" she gasped. "Not *more* damage!" She ran into the kitchen and got Mr. Rutherford's fish knife, with lack of hesitation which he did not at the moment perceive.

Gritting her teeth, she sawed away at the heavy cord which held the torn paper together. Webster said, "Can't I do that for you, Miss Althea?" but she seemed not to hear him.

She worked furiously, and with a rare lack of co-ordination, and it took her longer to get the thing open than it should have done. Even though it had more knots than a Houdini finale, Webster could have done the job in half her time But, at last, she finished and ripped off the paper. Then she let out the goldarndest screech he had ever heard. The tears spurted from her eyes as if some-

one had let loose a tear-gas bomb, and she flung herself around and burrowed her face into the bedclothes.

Webster looked at what had caused this outburst and saw a Picasso like the one Mr. Rutherford had owned, only the frame on this one was broken in a couple of spots and the paint in the lower right-hand corner was badly scratched. There was a curved three-inch crack in the woman's second face, as though some giant had poked a fingernail into it.

"It's ruined," Althea sobbed. "Absolutely ruined."

"That curve's where it rested against the top of the pheasant can," he remarked, unable to resist this one last dig. "That sure was a foolish place to put it."

"Oh, I know!" She beat the bed with a fist. "Don't keep rubbing it into me You win, Webster. Now get out of here and leave me alone."

"Gladly, miss," he said haughtily. "I've got work to do over at Mrs. Randall's. I'll just change my Prince Albert for a clean white jacket I've got in your kitchen closet, after the funeral's over, elsewise I'll be out of your way.

"You be a good girl and wash your face and get pretty for the funeral. You don't want people to see you looking like this. And the Lord knows why you're taking on so, anyhow, seeing as this is only a reproduction. Mr. Rutherford owned the real one."

"That's right," she said, parrotwise. "This is just a reproduction." And then she was off upon another wave of weeping, mighty as the hurricanes he saw when he toured the Deep South with the showboat *Florida Blossom*, and just as certain to blow itself out.

Like a kid with a busted doll, he thought as he walked up the green stairs, and then on the seventh step he stood stock-still and wondered where his reasoning powers could have gone to that he could have so disremembered; Mr. Rutherford's Picasso was the one the man had said wasn't real. Well, if it wasn't, then maybe the one Miss Althea

was hollering about *was*, and this was something that deserved a little studying.

He had the Randall kitchen all to himself to think around in, and as he made the early preparations for the luncheon he sorted out his thoughts, discarding some as he did the wilted lettuce leaves, affixing others as firmly as the cloves into the ham. When he got through he had a story that hung together like two drops in jelly time.

It went something like this: Miss Althea was up to some monkey business with Mr. Rutherford's collection, possibly with the aid of that young protégé of hers who had painted the Taylors' wedding present, the clever artist who had borrowed the mood and palette of Rembrandt for that portrait, who might be equally adept at plagiarizing others.

He need not have been in a rush about it, either. Each picture was at his disposal approximately four weeks, the period Althea claimed was necessary for its proper cleaning, time enough to make two or three copies.

It was a pretty sweet little racket, if you admired that sort of thing; thirteen valuable paintings available to be precisely copied, the originals to be resold, the copies to be hung in the collection of a man who was nearsighted and vain about wearing his glasses. As a way to amass a small fortune within a year it could scarcely be improved upon.

But it had bugs, the biggest of which was the danger that someone would detect one of the phonies and tell the owner about it. Exactly that had happened, a little more than a week ago. Webster recalled Mr. Rutherford's petulance with the art expert who had first attested the Picasso's authenticity and then reversed himself. Since he had grumbled to Webster about it, there was a good chance that he had shared his beef with Althea, which must have upset that lady's applecart to a fare-thee-well.

Rutherford had said the expert planned to return with a committee and checking devices to prove his case. Althea, learning this, must nearly have had fits. She

would know that the proper Picasso must be in its place before the analysis, but that might well have been one of those things easier said than done.

Firstly, she would have to get back the original. If it had not already been sold, it would still be, logically, in the artist's studio. With this key, Webster could now make sense out of Althea's irate phone call on which he had eavesdropped yesterday morning. She had told the protesting party at the far end of the line that she had been trying to reach him all week and, failing that, had taken matters, and presumably the Picasso, into her own hands.

Not only the Picasso; the Cézanne, which now belonged to the Johnson Taylors, must also have been picked up on the same visit. As closely as he could remember, she'd said on the phone, "I thought you were finished with it. It's small, and it usually doesn't take you this long."

She'd also spoken about the repair job's having priority, meaning the scarred Picasso. And she had referred to something that "will be delivered to you in town today," which could only mean the paint, which the artist had refused and forwarded to her apartment, sending her into the fury that had backfired on Webster.

It all fitted nicely, except for one leftover piece named Bill Patterson. For the life of him, Webster couldn't figure out why Bill had looked so sick over the paint, had discarded a practically new suit smeared with it. Bill was scarcely the type with whom a sharp cookie like Althea would have conspired, or to whom she would have confided the secrets of her skullduggery, yet he obviously was onto the scheme and dreaded its discovery. Webster recalled Bill's panic at the dinner party last night when Dave Randall talked about appraisers, and the slip of his tongue when he asked his guests to have something more to "paint."

Everything else, however, dovetailed. Althea had heard in the grocery store Tuesday night that Rutherford was going out of town and would be back Friday evening, when a delegation of art critics was to call upon him.

She would know she had to work fast, and she was a girl who could do it.

She swiped Webster's key to the Rutherford flat Wednesday morning, when he was working at Randalls'. She drove to the artist's country studio and raided it of the Picasso and the Cézanne. Then, probably in the late afternoon or early evening, she let herself into Rutherford's place, carrying the larger picture.

She must quickly have discovered that the fish knife was ideal for cutting the heavy cord which bound it, because she had certainly made a beeline for it this morning when the need again arose. Furthermore, the reason she had not completed the unwrapping on Wednesday was obvious, a small, four-legged reason answering, when he chose, to the name of Angus.

Webster could see it vividly, the cat defending its home against the hated neighbor, the woman's arms being scratched so deeply that they later bled all over a turquoise pillow slip. Using the painting as a shield, she had backed toward the door, the cat pursuing her, tearing the paper, scratching the paint in the lower right-hand corner of the Picasso, driving so deeply into the canvas that two of its claws were extracted.

No wonder Angus was so mad at Althea later, when Priscilla saw him hurl himself against her door. By that time Althea was downtown, having dinner with Priscilla's husband.

Or maybe by then she was begging fish scraps from the kitchen of the Publicist Club. What she did with these when she got home, Angus had tried to tell Webster last night, when the light flashed on in Althea's kitchen; across the dumb-waiter shaft the cat had begged for an encore of what had, to him, been a fascinating performance.

The fish head in the basement had possibly tried to tell Webster the same thing yesterday morning. Now it was clear that Althea, Wednesday night, had hauled up the dumb-waiter and, after opening the sprung door across the way, lured Angus onto it with a fish. Then the after-his-

fashion-faithful watch cat had been lowered into the cellar, unaware that he was deserting the line of duty at a moment when his services were sorely needed.

The coast must then have appeared invitingly clear to Althea. Probably she had not yet discovered that Angus had left his mark upon the Picasso during their earlier encounter, and she would make haste to conclude the job he had interrupted.

Ay, there, Mr. Rutherford, waiting in your trap, set, perhaps, expressly for Althea! What passed between you two old friends, after Althea walked in? Or was Johnson Taylor there, too, to make it a threesome? Webster would have given his Sir Henry Irving autograph to know.

He weighed the notion of informing the police that there was something of interest in Althea's apartment, leaving the murder out of it for the time being and letting them work toward it from the art theft, but he had already developed the private eye's traditional reluctance to call in the pros.

If there were only some way, he groped, of bluffing Miss Althea into thinking he knew more than he did, of throwing the fear of God into her. She did not seem to be a God-fearing woman, but it was hard to tell with those emotional ones. She'd sure been frightened this morning, in a mood to repent and be saved. If he could just nudge her onto the sawdust trail, confession might not only be good for her soul but should clear the air considerably.

There was a way he could do it, he suddenly knew; the means was right under his nose, far more literally than that phrase is usually meant.

He'd always thought he would have made a fine preacher if the world had not latched onto him. Well, he'd been granted a pulpit, or what could pass for same, at Mr. Rutherford's funeral. With a little preparation, he could shout Miss Althea's way to glory.

He sat down and started to draft his sermon on the misprinted memo pad.

15

THE MAN who intoned the eulogy over the silver urn had surely not known Mr. Rutherford very well. It was an adaptable eulogy in the large economy size, phrased in generalities which could be satisfactorily applied to any male who had made a sufficient amount of money to afford it. It lacked the personal touch, and Webster was afraid each time the subject's name was mentioned that the speaker would have to read it off a prompt card.

It didn't matter, however. Aside from Webster and his six clients, there was a similar lack of intimacy with the departed among the persons who crowded the chapel. A few bore faces which Webster had glimpsed behind brandy inhalers at Mr. Rutherford's, but for the most part they were strangers, the curious, who had been drawn like bees to the scent of funeral flowers.

The floral offerings were pretty measly, according to his way of thinking Characteristically, Althea had sent a stunning, exquisitely arranged bouquet of yellow calla lilies and clivia. The Taylors had done the more conventional with white callas. The Randalls, doubtlessly directed by their subconscious minds, had sent a vast sheaf of snapdragons, while Bill Patterson had obviously let his florist sell him a pig in a poke, a mess of conflicting colors which would have set Rutherford to screaming.

Webster's own dark red gladioli looked dignified and unpretentious amid the remaining tributes, which were of the "Knock-off-a-buck-and-leave-out-the-baby's-breath" type As the insincere, paid-to-talk voice droned on about Death, he thought of how really little Mr. Rutherford had got out of living. To be able to leave not one mourning friend seemed total failure. A personality which had so vaguely impressed itself upon people that no one had

shouted, "Mortimer Rutherford could not have burned to death without contrivance!" seemed hardly worth the bother of evolving.

The speaker was getting all wound up in his peroration. Knowing that he was next on the program, Webster fished for his notes, although, quick study that he was, he had already committed them to memory.

As he began to rehearse he realized that he was staring at Mrs. Randall's liquor list, which had already been attended to. He reversed the sheet and read the spiritual he had written.

As spirituals went, he was first to admit, it was no great shakes. It seemed to have been crossed with a calypso of the variety which he sometimes heard in his neighborhood, the kind which mercifully remains impromptu. For the purpose, however, he hoped it would serve. Its tune was a medley of "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel" and "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen," in a free adaptation which permitted the addition or subtraction of notes where indicated, and its rhymes were obvious. It was out of keeping, but that was how he wanted it to be. He wanted it to stand out like a sore forefinger beckoning the guilty.

As the eulogizer, having finished, now beckoned him, Webster rose and there was a rustle of anticipation in the chapel, the nearest thing to applause permissible under the circumstances. *A cappella,* he first gave them "Deep River," and saw that he had his audience with him. Mrs. Randall borrowed her husband's handkerchief to weep into, and Priscilla Taylor, sitting next to them, held Johnson's hand. Directly in back of them with Bill Patterson, Althea bowed her head so that her face was almost concealed by her fabulously large black velvet picture hat. Piously, as he swung into "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," Webster prayed that his own composition would make her sit up and take notice.

At the song's conclusion he allowed a full minute for a change of mood. Bill Patterson, looking no more or

less mournful than usual, uncrossed his legs and recrossed them in the opposite direction, as did most of the other men in what Webster now chose to look upon as his congregation. He edged sidewise so that he confronted it over Mr. Rutherford's earthly remains, and fixed his eyes upon its pertinent members. Then he hurled at them:

"Did you think *the Lord didn't see you,*
Didn't see you,
Didn't see you?
In that place where you didn't belong?"

Althea looked up wonderingly, as if she knew this song wasn't "Dixie" and was trying to place it. To give its specialness a chance to penetrate, he threw in a couple of hallelujahs before singing the verse straight at her:

"If you keep playing round with fire,
The Lord's gwine to send you where it's hot.
For the Lord sure hates a miserable liar.
Don't go thinking He thinks you're not."

He sang the chorus again, admonishingly, with such fervor and absorption that his unbidden hands crept around Mr. Rutherford's urn and hung on. On the third "Didn't see you" he caught Miss Althea's eye and thought it flickered a bit, but—you had to hand it to her—it didn't bat He switched from singing to recitative, real revival preachin' talk:

"All this stealin', this making of false images to hang in the places of the true images, the Lord don't like that. No, sir, he don't.

"He don't like this two-timin', and if'n you cheat with the spouse of one neighbor you can't get back into His good graces by feedin' the cat of another. All the fishes in all the oceans ain't gwine to help you none, do you hear? All the paint in the world ain't going to cover up you dee-fects. He knows, God does.

"Stealin' shames God. Cheatin' mortifies him. Killin' comes next, and the Lord sure hates a killer. He'll consume you with His fire, as you have done unto others. For the golden rule is the best rule, oh mourners Amen."

His hands shook upon the urn and he at last realized what they were holding onto and put them behind his back. Miss Althea's hatbrim covered her face again and he knew he'd done about all he could, but that did not diminish the intensity with which he reprised the chorus. "Did you think the Lord didn't see you?" Every one of you, you worthless backsliders, you compromisers with murder?

On the last "see you" he let his voice drop to a whisper. "In the place where you didn't belong" was velvety and hushed. He let the last note fade and its echoes evaporate before he stepped down from the platform and resumed his seat.

Mrs. Randall touched his shoulder, mutely thanked him. He turned around to smile you're welcome, and noticed that the Taylors were no longer holding hands. Both of Mr. Taylor's, as a matter of fact, were doubled up in his lap like fists.

16

Miss Althea's expression when she saw the chop panties Mrs. Randall had put upon the furniture was enough to make you bust out laughing. She immediately set about clearing her good name, assuring everyone that although she had decorated the flat she had at least recognized the point at which to stop, and disowning responsibility for all subsequent embellishments.

Margie Randall took it all with good grace, overlooking the sarcasm of the comments which she could not fail to overhear; she was evidently one of the legion who

positively knows what it likes. She was flushed with the excitement of hostessing her first large party, one which, despite its somber origin, promised to be gay. Seven assorted mourners had snapped at her invitation, and were now wistfully waiting for Webster to finish mixing the first shaker of cocktails.

Since the Taylors, Althea, and Bill had also accepted, that made thirteen in all, an apt number for a funeral party. Webster, however, was being treated like the fourteenth man, by far the most popular member of the group. They all raved about his performance at the chapel. They screamed, "You ought to be on the stage!" with an air of discovery, as if he had not already played three seasons with the Swamp Rabbits before the fathers of most of these people found out about the birds and bees. Inevitably (he had banked on it), someone asked the origin of his last number.

"I made it up myself, you know," he said, that there should be no doubt about it. "Hasn't got a name as yet. Must give it one."

"Maybe it would be better to forget the whole thing," Althea muttered.

She looked bad, close to. Her eyes were red-streaked and the flesh around them was swollen. Anyone could see that she had cried an awful lot but that the crying hadn't done her any good; whatever was hurting her deep down was still plaguing away unhealed. She tossed off her first gibson in what was good time even for her, and brought over her glass for a refill.

"Webster, I'd like to talk to you for a moment," she said.

"I reckoned you'd be likely to, miss," he told her coldly, "but I'm booked pretty solid for the next hour or so serving all these folks their lunch."

"I suppose you are," she conceded. "Reserve me some time during the early part of the afternoon, will you?"

The last was delivered flippantly, but her brass section was a little flat. There was no mistaking the fact that he

had her worried, and that was the way he wanted her to remain. The longer he let her simmer in her own juice, the better were his chances of extracting the whole truth when he finally consented to listen to her.

It occurred to at least two persons to crack, "And he can cook, too!" when they sampled the luncheon, and Webster caught that predatory look which presaged some sharp bargaining for his services. Many of the bereaved, it was apparent, were eager to fill the dead man's shoes insofar as his relationship with Webster was concerned, appreciating the fact that this rare jewel would not only make living more pleasant but could, in due time, considerably liven up one's funeral.

The meal was served buffet style, curled pink slices of ham, candied sweet potatoes, corn sticks, and tossed green salad. Waiting at the serving table for the expected demand for seconds, he prepared the case against Althea; the faster he could think on his feet during the impending interview, the greater would be his advantage.

Miss Althea would have an awful handicap anyway. In Webster's presence she had not drawn an unskittish breath since Mr. Rutherford died. She was as taut and tinny as a banjo string, with her temper tethered on a skinny little old piece of rope which wouldn't even hold a hound puppy. She'd let it get away from her this morning, last night when she nearly threw the glass at Angus, and yesterday morning when the box of paint arrived. She would surely lose it a fourth time when Webster paraded his facts.

He hoped fervently that the red she would see would blind her to the inconclusiveness of his story. He could narrate her Wednesday-night activities, with chapter and verse, up to the point of Angus's enticement. He could accuse her of having then gone to Rutherford's apartment, but he had found no clue to prove that she was there when the master died.

Assuming she killed him, she must also have transposed their easy chairs, which would leave her with a

fireproofed number on her hands. There was one such in the basement. Another had been moved out of the Taylors' place by Miss Priscilla, but the former was surely the important one. Unless it was hot, why should anyone have hidden it in the coalbin?

Miss Althea might have put it there and bought herself a new one, except that the chair in her place was definitely not new. It had obviously led a full life, the details of which were a mystery to Webster.

The faster eaters were already lining up beside his table with expectant faces and empty plates. He had to concentrate upon shaving the ham thinly enough to go around without having the portions look skimpy, it being up to him to guard the Randalls' newly founded reputation for hospitality. With a knack which had helped him through various times of stress he fixed his attention upon the moment and its work. In short, he stopped sleuthing and wholeheartedly buttled.

For dessert, because he knew Margie Randall's sweet tooth would desire one, there was pale green mint sherbet with thin chocolate sauce dashed with *crème de cacao.* With this he had considered liqueurs in liquid form redundant. For the thirsty, however, he placed an assortment of bottles and glasses on the living-room table, so that there might be no mistaking the standards of the household.

Beside that table sat Priscilla Taylor, in the chair that was like Mr. Rutherford's. Completely disguised now in its fussy slip cover, it was doubtful if Priscilla had marked its basic resemblance to the article with which she had been so eager to part the day before. Her feet were tucked up under her cosily. There was a tiny drop of chocolate on her upper lip, and she looked like a docile child who would favorably regard the suggestion of a nap.

As Webster took her empty dessert plate away she smiled at him. He smiled back at her, broadly, only it wasn't really at her but at something she had brought to his mind. She had fueled up and blown the whistle of

another one of those trains of thought of his. He was chugging down the track now under his own power, thinking about the chair that burned and the chair that didn't, the one that had been in Mr Rutherford's apartment, the one in Althea's, and the one that Priscilla had tried to ditch.

The one in Miss Althea's, which he had set fire to, was all scuffed up about the legs, like it would happen if you carried a chair up and downstairs not too carefully. And in those gouges was red stuff, like paint you might pick up if those stairs were red. Only there wasn't any real good reason why Miss Althea's chair should have been anywhere near red-painted steps. It must have gone out of its way to get there.

The stairs outside this foyer door, between the Randall and the Taylor apartment, were red. Those between Althea's and Mr. Rutherford's were green.

He remembered what Priscilla had told him, that Althea had insisted upon the Taylors' going out Thursday evening and had volunteered to keep tabs on the ailing Angus. Althea, who was about as crazy about that cat as a mouse would be! But surely she'd be eager to do a little cat-sitting if it provided an open door through which she could carry the Taylors' wholly innocent chair, up the red-for-port steps and down the green-for-starboard, to substitute for the incriminating fireproof number in her own flat. On the return trip she reversed the finger of doubt so that it pointed squarely at Johnson and Priscilla.

This suggested that Althea could not even be true to an illicit love and would cheerily throw him to the wolves for her own convenience. That manifestation of her true nature did not surprise Webster. What did disturb him was that adopting this theory meant abandoning the superfluous chair Mrs. Mueller had found. Resolving to straighten out that kink at a later date, he realized that he now had enough tickets to bluff Althea into giving up the pot.

Contemplating the pleasant prospect, his facial muscles momentarily relaxed and he caught himself grinning. So,

he observed, did Althea, whose wary eye went stone-cold dead. He half turned away from her, his features now under control, and spoke to Margie Randall in a confidential tone which could be, and often had been, heard way up in the peanut gallery.

"I'll be out in the kitchen doing the dishes," he said with pontifical dignity. "Just so anyone who wants me will know where I may be found."

It wouldn't be long, he knew, before Althea would seek him out.

She was speedier than he had expected, he thought as he heard footsteps above the swirl of water in Mrs. Randall's sink. He closed the faucets, reached for a towel, and dried his hands. He did not turn around but waited for her to speak first, to strike the key in which the conversation would begin, which he would then proceed to modulate in his own good time. If Althea would just say some damn-fool thing right off the bat, a likely contingency, he would instantly have the upper hand.

Nobody, however, said anything for an uneasy length of time. Webster selected an innocuous phrase to get things going: "What did you want to see me about?" he asked, and faced the kitchen's other occupant, who was not Miss Althea.

It was Johnson Taylor, jerkily fingering the crow-shade crocheted tie he had worn to the funeral. "Why, Mr. Johnson!" Webster exclaimed. "Can I get you something?"

Johnson lowered his head and looked extremely uncomfortable. "The question is," he said, "what can I get you? And where am I to get it? I'm not a rich man, you know. How much do you want?"

Webster felt himself floundering, having lost the gist. It was like listening to that crazy bebop music wherein the obbligato is played instead of the melody and if you lose track of the tune you're lost.

Johnson came closer, spoke querulously. "Nobody but

you, Webster, would take the trouble to be so dramatic about blackmail. *You* couldn't came to me quietly and tell me what you knew. *You* had to make a production of it and sing it out in chapel."

Then Webster understood. There were several words in his sermon-spiritual that could apply to Johnson as well as to Althea He'd said "cheatin' with your neighbor's spouse," not "wife" or "husband." He had concentrated with such singleness of purpose upon Althea that it had not occurred to him that some other might take the sermon unto himself Inadvertently he had brought down two birds with one song, and he didn't exactly know what to do with this member of the brace.

"How much do you want?" Johnson repeated.

"You hush with such talk, boy," Webster said crossly. "You trying to make me mad? We've been friends, and I've worked for you, a great many years, and so far as I know that's the way it stands. Let's not spoil it."

He groped wildly for a method of explaining his sermon without admitting that he had tried to extract a confession of murder from Althea. He did not even want to mention murder, nor did he honestly believe that Johnson was directly involved in Rutherford's death. He was fond of the boy, who was certainly guilty of two-timing his bride, but whose sins he did not believe to exceed that fairly, albeit unfortunately, commonplace level.

Johnson twitched his tie again, and uttered an irritable and unprintable expletive. "It's ironical," he continued more articulately, "that this trouble should arise just when the whole bloody affair was over. I said good-by forever to Althea Wednesday night You know so much about it, would you like to hear the rest? It would do me good to get it off my chest."

"Of course, I would, Mr. Johnson," Webster said kindly, thinking, Don't tell me too much, son; don't put me in the position of being your father-confessor and morally bound to keep my mouth shut if you did have something to do with the murder.

The young man, looking younger and more vulnerable than he had ever done before, perched upon one of the tall kitchen stools; with no effort at all Webster could visualize the dunce cap which made him look like a schoolboy waiting for teacher to decide upon his punishment. But he did not—in the slightest degree—look like a murderer.

"There was a whole lot of business as well as pleasure mixed up in it," he began.

The buzzer sounded, and Webster pushed the little red button to release the catch downstairs.

"The business was slightly of the monkey variety, I'll admit," Johnson said as the buzzer buzzed again. This time the caller's finger remained on its mark for several seconds.

"Postman," Webster guessed contemptuously. "Postman always rings twice, and as if he had the whole U.S. government behind him. Excuse me a minute, sir, while I see what he's got."

"Sure," Johnson said disconsolately. "I'll wait right here."

It was a special-delivery letter for David Randall that Webster brought back into the apartment. David was pinned to the wall, near the improvised bar, being talked at by Miss Althea. Webster handed the envelope to his wife, who tore it open, read a few lines, and vaguely said, "Oh! This is for David," before she walked away.

"Maybe I'm a little bit too ambitious," Johnson mused when Webster returned to the kitchen, as though he had been sitting there mulling over the possibility. "Maybe I want to get there too fast. If that is so, I put the blame squarely on Mortimer Rutherford."

He opened a platinum case, offered Webster a cigarette, took one himself, lit both. "I mean," he said, "that whereas I always knew I'd do all right eventually, Mort made such a fuss over me when I first went to work for him that I began to think I was going to do it in no time at all. That was greedy, I suppose. A man doesn't really

need to be able to buy things like this"—he tossed the case upon the table—"before he's thirty."

"Or a Cézanne," Webster added judicially.

"Or a Cézanne," Johnson echoed. "I'll explain about that later. But Rutherford was like that, you know. He flattered you, got you to thinking out of your class, so that you were challenging the champ when you still should be fighting in the preliminaries. He practiced an exquisite form of cruelty. He raised your hopes, let you believe he was on your side and you could count on him for anything, then he let you down hard."

He stared into space moodily, and Webster's own mind's eye saw a comic strip of Rutherford, dressed as an Armenian rug peddler, selling what were purportedly magic carpets which turned out to be the poorest grade linoleum. Any sucker who had fallen for his pitch would be bound to get sore. Even Webster, who had known the score and placed slim faith in the promised legacy of the apartment houses, had not been happy to find his doubts confirmed. Rutherford had been a special type of practical joker, pulling intangible chairs out from under his victims. Well, someone had eventually fixed a chair for him which was tangible enough, and lethal.

"I expected to skyrocket," Johnson resumed. "Johnson Taylor, boy tycoon." He touched his breast and once again uttered his favorite all-purpose oath. "Now it seems that I'm the man of extinction.

"I got round shoulders carrying all those raises he was going to give me around in my wallet. And last month, when there was the first real good chance for advancement in the office, he gives it to a client's brother-in-law.

"I wasn't in debt"—he paused before tacking on the revealing word—"yet, but I didn't want to lower the standard of living I had anticipated. I thought of a way to make a lot of money on the side. It required the cooperation of Mortimer Rutherford. He refused it.

"I knew there was a fortune to be made in promoting the fireproofing agent my grandfather-in-law invented.

even Rutherford without his specs. They'd got the idea that if the paintings could be fired, like china, it would give the effect of the paint's having been on the canvas a long time. They burned up more pictures, experimenting.

"That's where I moved in. It occurred to me that Priscilla's grandfather, who is really a whiz of a chemist, might be able to process the paint so it wouldn't burn, wouldn't crack under the most intense heat. I put it up to him, and he said could do.

"I didn't tell him about the crooked aspects of the thing, of course, or he wouldn't have had any part of it. I just said that Althea wanted this particular kind of paint to use in her decorating business, and that the thing had to be hush-hush so her competitors wouldn't hear about it until she was ready to roll. Also that it had to be quiet, inasmuch as we were adapting the fireproofing formula, so that Rutherford could not accuse us of infringing his rights.

"I especially told him not to mention anything to Priscilla because on account of Althea's being an old girl of mine she wouldn't want to think of my having any dealings with her. The old boy isn't too old to remember that women are like that. He swallowed the story, and I set him up in a little laboratory out near where he lives.

"The whole thing seemed to have a kind of poetic justice to me. I planned to use the money I made to finance the fireproofing stuff and whatever legal tangles I got into with Mort as a result of it. Indirectly, and quite unwittingly, he'd be forking over the capital I'd been trying to squeeze out of him for months."

He sighed, went on, "We never made a lousy dime. In fact, you might say no criminal offense has been committed. A phony Picasso hangs in Mort's collection for several weeks, that's all. Althea would have replaced it with the genuine one Wednesday night if the damned cat hadn't chased her off. It developed that he had also scratched hell out of it, but it can be repaired. No harm done, you might say."

Except to Mr. Rutherford, Webster reflected. The damage he had suffered was irreparable. And, he wondered, did you have a hand in it, my fine, clear-eyed young friend, sitting there with your soul all smoothed by confession?

"I hadn't known anything about Mort's suspicions until Wednesday evening," Johnson continued. "Althea had been living with them for two days. Monday night Mort had made some pretty pointed remarks to her and Bill. He seemed to think Bill was in on the plot. I suppose because it hadn't happened until after Bill moved in with him.

"Strictly *sub rosa*, and for a fancy fee, he'd had one of the top Picasso men in the country up there that afternoon, who told him it was a phony. The critic whose judgment Mort had challenged last week was due back this Friday night. Of course that date was canceled by Mort's death, but he couldn't foresee that. He was in deadly fear that he would become the laughing stock of the art world when it was exposed that he had been duped. He implied that no questions whatsoever would be asked if the real Picasso was back in place by Friday.

"Bill, who must have been completely in the dark as to what the hints were about, took the plane for Washington later that night. Althea stayed here and worried. She figured it was better to give up the sale of the Picasso, although she already had a prospective buyer, lie low for a while until things cooled off, then start operating again."

Johnson stopped suddenly. Webster readily saw why. Althea, herself, was bearing down upon them.

"Bar none," she blazed, "that is the most boring bunch of people I ever ran into. I'm going home. Johnson, did you give Webster the hell he deserves?"

"I tried," Johnson said lamely.

"Well, since he's all in one piece I guess you didn't do a very good job. Come over to my place later, Webster. I've got things to say to you."

It was an order from the Empress Althea, and after issuing it she turned and flounced away.

There remained some information which Johnson had not volunteered, and Webster decided to plumb for it:

"Are you really all through with Miss Althea, I mean that way? Of course I know the picture-copying part of it is over, of necessity."

"Yes, I'm through with her." Johnson's chin jutted. "I finally got the guts Wednesday night to tell her it was over. It was sort of a delayed reaction, I must admit. My wife called me at the club after dinner. She was crying. She needed me. It wasn't until a couple of hours later that I realized I wanted to go to her instead of staying with Althea."

The steward at the club had placed Priscilla's call at about nine-thirty. Johnson's redemption, Webster calculated, must have occurred between eleven-thirty and midnight.

"Althea was enraged," Johnson said. "Since we're talking man to man, I won't blush to admit that she put up quite a fight. But she finally threw in the towel and went home."

Carrying her bundle of fish, Webster added mentally, the offering for Angus. Miss Althea must have felt like a real dog around midnight Wednesday. He was almost sorry for her.

"Even then," Johnson revealed, "I didn't come directly home to Priscilla. I couldn't. I felt dirty. I walked miles, through parts of the city I had never even seen. I stopped in a few bars. When they got that near-closing look, I found out it was after three o'clock, so I grabbed a cab and went home. When I got there Priscilla was awake, and it was like I had never been away."

Poor little thing, Webster thought, alone there, awake and waiting, after what terrible thing had passed between her and Rutherford at which she had barely hinted. Nor had she mentioned the lateness of her husband's homecoming. It must be a thing to worry her deeply, not knowing where he had been, fearing, maybe, that he might have used that time out to kill Rutherford. Unless, on the

other hand, she had performed that little service to humanity her own self.

"I'll never go away again, Webster," Johnson was saying soberly. "Can I rely upon you not to say anything about this to Mrs. Taylor? It'd only be ancient history. Why dig it up?"

"I won't, Mr. Johnson," Webster promised. "I'm sorry I had to upset you this morning. I was truly aiming only at Miss Althea."

He scratched his head. "One thing puzzles me," he said, "if I may be so bold as to ask it. If you're so broke, how come you bought yourself a Cézanne?"

"I didn't buy it, Webster," Johnson replied. "Althea gave it to me, or at least half of it. After the other thing was over between us, I guess she felt she needed something else as collateral.

"I'd advanced the cash for the laboratory and equipment. She gave me a half interest in the Cézanne, plus the pleasure of having it hang in my apartment, as assurance that I would eventually get my bait back when it was sold. Knowing her little tricks, I insisted upon having it verified as genuine before accepting it. We went to every man in town, Thursday afternoon, who knew anything about Cézanne."

Webster pursed his lips speculatively. "Mr. Johnson, boy," he said at length, "I'm sorry to tell you, but I think you've been had. With my own ears I heard Miss Althea talking to her artist friend on the phone yesterday morning. I'm sure he'd been copying the Cézanne and she'd taken it away before he was finished. She promised to get it back to him. What could she have been fixing to do except to slip the copy on to you and resell the original? You were to be the new fall guy, now that Mr. Rutherford is finished."

Johnson's mouth hung open.

"Don't you recall how she tried to get the picture back last evening?" Webster pressed.

"I thought she had really found a buyer and I was going to get the money immediately," the other sputtered.

"Not her. She wanted to rush it to the artist, who was real sore at her. 'Over the week end, sometime,' she said on the phone. That Miss Althea, she can't level with nobody."

"The——" Johnson said, using another, equally short expletive. It suited Miss Althea Tamblyn to a *t*.

17

THE DISHES COULD WAIT, Webster decided when Johnson had gone, whereas Althea couldn't. He hated to leave a messy kitchen, but today was kind of hard on rules.

"Come in," Althea called sharply in response to his first tap upon her door.

He found her sitting in a straight chair turned away from her desk. She was pitching playing cards into a jardiniere set in the far corner of the room, a form of therapy she employed only in moments of dire stress.

"What took you so long?" she asked in annoyance. "Has Johnson been talking to you all this time?"

"Yes, ma'am, he has."

"What a windbag!"

She sighted the jardiniere and took careful aim with the three of spades. It landed a good two feet short of its mark, and she hurled a whole fistful of cards, about half the deck, after it. Without a word, Webster stooped to pick them up. If you get used to picking up after a person it's a hard habit to break. When he had finished he brought the cards back to her and she began to shuffle them, over and over.

"You'll wear out the spots, Miss Althea," he warned, but she did not stop. Her nervousness was contagious. He

caught himself cracking his knuckles and shoved his hands into his pockets, where they fiddled with his change, his key ring.

Althea turned her chair to face the desk and laid out a four-card solitaire.

"I've got work to do, ma'am," he pointed out. "Unless you really do want to talk to me I'd better get back to it."

She put a black ten on a red knave and said, "I'll give you five hundred dollars to keep your mouth shut."

Business was booming, he noted. He could have made himself a rich man today had he not been an honest one. He wondered how the rumor that he was for sale had got started. Although neither of the prospective buyers had appeared to doubt his availability. Johnson Taylor had at least the politeness to have asked his price. Miss Althea, on the other hand, had done her own appraising, and he felt that the value she put upon his integrity was insultingly low.

"I'm afraid that's out of the question," he told her. "In fact, it's strictly no dice."

"Six hundred?" she dickered, turning around to face him.

"It's no dice at any price." He closed the bidding.

Her mouth curled down at the corners, then she repeated his phrase and said, "You're quite a rhymester, aren't you, Webster? But that little number you sang in chapel this morning will never get the Pulitzer prize."

"I think I got the point across, however, miss," he said airily. "I was merely taking that opportunity to show you that I am not deaf, dumb, and blind."

She scooped up the cards, began to shuffle them again, and he longed to slap her fluttering hands. "Go on," she urged.

"It's your move, miss, I think," he demurred. "However, I'll be glad to tell you what I already know, so you'll see where to begin. I know how you've been fooling around with Mr. Rutherford's art collection and Mrs. Taylor's husband. I know where you were Wednesday eve-

ning, what time you went home, and how you tricked Angus out of his house with a fish."

She interrupted, patronizingly. "So you said. So I inferred from your little homily this morning. That's why I offered you the five hundred. I can't afford much more than six, what with my peachy little art swindle collapsing. Someone killed the goose that was going to lay my golden eggs."

She stopped abruptly and fumbled the cards to the floor again. This time Webster let them lay.

"Is the goose you're referring to named Rutherford?" he asked. "You're suggesting that somebody killed him, that it wasn't just an accident?"

"It's an old Ecuadorian proverb," she said flippantly. "Don't be so literal-minded. I simply meant that Mr. Rutherford's dying cut off my potential source of supply. Where else can I find a nearsighted egotist who lets me take his priceless possessions to the cleaners once a month? I'll give you six fifty and not a penny more."

"No," he said with such finality that a look of resignation came into her eyes. After barely a moment of preparation she altered her tactics, abandoning the offensive.

"Look, Webster," she said almost plaintively. "I can't see what you could possibly gain by turning me in. I started something which is strictly illegal, but it's at an end, truly it is. I've a fair chance of getting away with it, when the Picasso is patched up and put back into the collection, unless someone rats on me. Why be such a stinker? Who but me is losing anything?"

"The heirs," he replied promptly. "That picture's pretty badly damaged. Even when it's repaired it won't be as valuable as it once was."

"I couldn't care less." She laughed harshly. "Good God, Webster, the Randalls are inheriting about a million dollars because Mort was too self-confident to make a will. If he had done so, most of the estate would probably have gone to a home for wayward cats and the Randalls would never have smelled a penny of it. With all that luck, don't

you honestly think they can lose a lousy grand or so on one painting?"

She damned Mortimer and his willessness. "Don't forget," she said, "that he had always promised to leave me the collection. In effect, I was merely borrowing from my legacy in advance. Only he neglected to attend to his part of it."

She had a point there, Webster could see, a provocative one which might interestingly serve as a subject for debate, one which she might be able to argue with complete persuasion because of her astigmatic difficulties in distinguishing between right and wrong. Not being an inveterate first-stone caster, Webster realized that a slight mutation in his own make-up might cause him to feel that he had been robbed of the promised apartment houses.

If the scheme had come to light while Rutherford was still alive, Webster might well have been inclined to tell Miss Althea to put the painting back where she had found it, to promise silence in exchange for her vow to stop her foolishment Larceny, however grand, seemed only mischievous with a target as apt as Mortimer, but murder was always murder.

"As a matter of fact," Althea was saying, "the Randalls won't fare too badly. If I handle the sale of the collection for them I don't believe I'd have the gall to take my commission. If I waive it, will you stop with your lousy highmindedness?"

"No," he said again. "You must not ask me to do it."

"But why?" It was the wail of a rotten-spoiled child who wants to play by her own rules instead of those the world imposes. With an uncustomary lack of grace she bent awkwardly to pick up the cards which were fanned about her feet. "Sit down, Webster, for Pete's sake"—she had evidently just noticed that he had been standing throughout the interview—"and tell me what makes you so blooming noble."

He declined the invitation, thinking that he might want to duck fast after what he had decided to say to her. "I

can't make any compromises, miss," he began, "because the matter is far too serious. The thievery is one thing, but it looks to me like it led to something worse, so I think the authorities ought to hear about it for a starter."

"Something worse?" She culled the words and tossed them back at him.

"Yes, ma'am. For you and I both know that Mr. Rutherford's death was no accident."

With great deliberateness she turned away from him toward the desk and dealt a hand of canfield, paying precise attention to the alignment of the cards, playing to an invisible grandstand.

"It's strange that you should bring that up," she said at last in a monotone, "because I was under the impression that you had killed him."

Webster sat down then sure enough, his heart pounding in sudden fear, his wit routed by panic. That was not Miss Althea he saw before him seated at her desk, so poised, so assured, so smug and invulnerable in her mantle of whiteness. She was the figurehead of a world in which it was, at best, difficult for one of his kind to live.

"I heard you quarreling with him last Thursday," she said, her tongue curling like the flame of a Klansman's torch. "I heard him calling you names. And then you ostensibly didn't come to work at all this Thursday, and Mr. Rutherford was found dead."

He merely caught the crackle of her words and did not bother fully to comprehend them, because exactly what she said, then or any other time, did not matter. If she chose to accuse him she could find many sympathetic listeners, who would reserve him no benefits of doubt.

He now wished he had carried his suspicions to the police on Thursday evening. The fact that he had remained silent for two days might very well count against him. At the moment he could think of nothing that would count *for* him. His native optimism, his resilience, had completely deserted him, and he was bereft of hope.

Miss Althea had no cause to behave this way. He'd

done his work, given her his loyalty, and worst of all he'd liked her, admired her through whatever temporary difficulties occurred between them. This was what hurt the most and brought the smarting tears to his eyes. To conceal them he buried his face in his hands.

It was scarcely a minute later that he heard footsteps coming toward him swiftly, and felt a light touch on his shoulder.

"Webster," Althea said more softly than he had ever heard her speak. "Webster, look at me."

"Not just now, miss," he mumbled behind his hands, "if you don't mind."

"But I *do* mind." He heard the simultaneous stamp of her foot. "I mind terribly. I didn't think you'd carry on so. I was only trying to threaten you so you wouldn't talk about me and the pictures. Since I couldn't buy you off, I tried to scare you off. I know you didn't murder Mr. Rutherford."

He looked at her then, reproach in his eyes. "Maybe you do know that, miss," he said sorrowfully, "but how many persons would guess it if you said otherwise? People are all too ready to believe the worst about someone like me if someone like you says it. Didn't you know that, Miss Althea?"

"I forgot," she said penitently. "I honestly forgot about the—the difference. I may be a heel, but not that kind. I'm sorry."

"You're always sorry," he said ruefully. "Maybe a lot of you are, but that doesn't do us any good, your being sorry afterwards."

She stamped her foot again and said, "For God's sake stop making me feel like Simon Legree. I said I'm sorry, and I meant it. Can't we stop acting like people in a pageant and get back to earth? If you don't stop you'll have me bawling too."

She was a bit late with her prognostication, for the tears had already started to flow. He let her cry for a while,

then fetched a damp washcloth from the bathroom and a jigger of bourbon from the bar.

"Thanks," she choked. "Thanks. What would I ever do without you, as I've so often asked? I don't know how you've stood me the last two days. My only excuse is I've nearly been out of my mind.

"You see"—she dabbed at a dilatory tear with the cloth—"something terrible happened to me on Wednesday evening. I saw Mr. Rutherford burning."

She polished off the bourbon and rolled the glass obliquely, watching the gathering droplets.

"Miss Althea," he began tentatively, "I think we'd all of us feel a little more friendly and relaxed if we found out just who did kill Mr. Rutherford, if we removed that person from our immediate circle."

"That's an understatement, Webster, one for the books. You got any ideas as to who it is?"

He scratched his head with a flamboyancy which demonstrated that he was once again himself, completely in control of a situation in which he felt at home.

"Trouble is, miss," he complained, "I've got plenty of ideas, but they all look as if anybody might have done it. You especially, if I may say so."

The bourbon had perked her up. She was once more mannered, enameled, and it was hard to read her thoughts as she asked—curiously, without a trace of anger or defensiveness, "Why me?"

He made a tall dark steeple of his slim fingers and whistled soundlessly across the top of it.

"Because you did a guilty-conscience thing, Miss Althea," he said. "With this chair, the one I'm sitting in. You swapped it in the Taylors' apartment for a fireproof one. There's red paint, like on the Taylors' stairs, in the crackedy legs of this chair. It wasn't there on Monday, when I last cleaned for you. How else can you explain it?"

"Obviously I can't," she snapped. "You're perfectly

right, but you seem to have misinterpreted my motives. You think the chair I brought over to the Taylors' used to stand in Mortimer's apartment. It never stood anywhere but here.

"When the fireproofing was being done, my office made an error and sent two chairs instead of one. I kept the second, Mort, of course, getting the other. After his death I got a little nervous about having one. There weren't any records of the duplication, and I was afraid that the police might get inquisitive and start burning a few chairs. When they did, I wanted to be in the clear."

"You didn't mind putting the Taylors in a spot," he observed.

"No. Frankly, I didn't."

"Well, you're sort of in one yourself, Miss Althea," he said gravely. " 'Less a second fireproofed chair turns up you'll have a hard time proving it ever existed."

"I know." Her voice was tense. "But you believe me, don't you, Webster?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said truthfully, thinking of the spare chair in the basement, "but maybe you'd better tell me what happened after you lowered Angus down on the dumb-waiter, so's I can judge if that part of the story would be believable to anyone else. Maybe it could stand a little tinkering, at which I could help."

"Okay," she agreed, and launched into it: "I wanted to finish the picture switching as quickly as possible. I was tired, dead-tired. I went into my dressing room, where I had left the Picasso. You know how it is in there, how you can hear every sound made in the Rutherford guest room, Bill Patterson's room?"

Webster nodded. "And vice versa," he added.

"Well, I heard a mumble of voices. Two different ones. As usual, I couldn't make out any words, but I knew that the apartment wasn't empty and I would have to postpone my visit for a while.

"I came in here, made myself a drink, and sat down to read, one ear cocked toward the hall.

"I must have dozed off for several minutes. I awoke to hear what I thought was someone leaving Mort's place, but what was actually someone going in. I went back to the dressing room and listened. All was quiet in Bill's room then, but I could still hear somebody walking around somewhere in that apartment. You know you get the vibrations through the floor boards?"

She didn't even wait for a nod this time. The lack of total privacy in this thin-walled old house was too ancient a topic to require much discussion.

"I stiffened my drink," she continued, "and came back in here and turned on the radio. The two o'clock news was just finishing. Before the next station break I heard someone leave Mort's apartment.

"I waited a few minutes more. I figured that Bill had come home unexpectedly from Washington and, finding Mort away, had entertained a guest. I thought I'd give him time to get to sleep before I proceeded."

"Was Mr. Bill home?" Webster broke in. "Could you be sure his was one of the voices you heard?"

She shook her head. "The voices came from his room, that's all I'm sure of. As to whether he was in there, I never found out. I never got any further than the door, when I finally went over."

She shuddered, got up, began to pace.

"The fire was almost out," she said in a monotone. "There was still a little fringe of it along the top of the chair, enough to illuminate his face, the outline of his body. Then that flickered out, too."

"His clothes!" Webster thought of them for the first time. "All of his clothes were fireproofed. They would have resisted."

"He was naked," Althea told him. "He liked to parade around in the nude, as you well know. He had the blinds drawn and the air conditioning was turned on. That's why I hadn't smelled the smoke, I suppose.

"I stood transfixed, until the last little wisp of flame died away, then came back here. I was absolutely terrified."

"Then why did you stay by yourself, miss?" he inquired pseudosympathetically. "At a time like that! And you could have got lots of company, policemen, the fire department, just by picking up the telephone."

She looked at him sharply, but he was acting to the hilt and she wasn't sure whether the apparent sarcasm had been intentional.

"I was too agitated even to think of calling them," she asserted. "And, besides, what good could they have done? Mortimer was beyond help, and I knew the rest of the place wouldn't catch fire. There wasn't any hurry about finding him, and I didn't feel up to a lot of interrogation and badgering. I must say it wasn't easy to get through the night knowing what was across the hall from me, but I managed."

She lit a cigarette and stared at the match. "Fire," she whispered. "Will I ever be able to see it without remembering?"

"You'll get over it, miss," Webster said confidently.

He had great faith in her recuperative powers. She was sturdy, Miss Althea was, also cute as a fox. She had almost, but not quite, drawn him into believing that she was telling the truth, and all of it. With someone who didn't know her so well she would be wholly successful.

"You heard the murderer's voice, and his footsteps," he summed up, temporarily pretending to accept her story's validity. "Did you get any impressions from them? I mean could you say if it was a man or a woman?"

She shrugged extravagantly. "Hard to tell," she said.

"And would you have any idea which direction the footsteps took when they left Rutherford's place? Toward the elevator? Up the stairs to the roof?"

She began shaking her head before he had finished the first question. "No idea," she said positively when he had finished.

He thought her denial a little too eager. It occurred to him that she might have some pretty strong suspicions as to the identity of Mr. Rutherford's last visitor, but he

could see that she had no intention of revealing them. He could not determine the reason for her caginess. In a more honorable character it could spring from a desire not to implicate the possibly innocent; with Miss Althea it might be that she very well knew the assailant's name, age, and occupation but was keeping mum until someone offered her a good price for singing.

She picked up her narrative: "I thought you'd find the body when you came to work in the morning. You're so capable, I knew you'd know just what to do about calling the police and making a report."

"Thanks for your confidence, miss," he said sardonically. "I'm happy I was spared the delightful forenoon you had planned for me. How did you expect me to get in without my key?"

"I relied upon your resourcefulness. I'd put the key under the mat, thinking you might remember how Bill used to do that when he lived with Johnson. Failing that, I thought you might forget your differences and get a key from Mrs. Mueller."

Had the sky not been so clear, had the Dodgers been playing a less critical game, he might have done just that, to stay in tune with his customary conscientiousness. Miss Althea was a good enough judge of human nature. It was just that she was a square where major-league standings were concerned.

"I heard you come to the door, then go away," she said. "I waited for you to come back, but you didn't.

"I wanted Mort's body moved out of there fast so that I could hang the genuine Picasso before people started snooping around in there. It never entered my mind that there wouldn't be a pretty thorough investigation, that the cops would just accept the death at face value. Didn't that surprise you?"

"Not too much," he replied. "I've read a lot of newspaper stories in which only one piece of furniture was burned, a chair, or a bed. It's one of those freak things that happens fairly frequently. The cops had no way of

I generously offered them some of mine, but discovered I'd have to blast to get the trays out. Frozen solid."

"There's loads here. I'll take it over," Webster offered, glad of an exit line and a plausible bit of business.

It wasn't until about fifteen minutes later, when he was wrist-deep in dishwater attending to the Randalls' dirty crockery, that he began to wonder about something Johnson had said.

The Taylors had an automatic defroster on their refrigerator that worked like a charm. It had been ticking away on Tuesday, when he last cleaned their place. Even if it had failed immediately thereafter, it seemed impossible that such a glacier as Johnson had described could have been built up in the interim. It looked like the boy was just making himself an excuse for calling on Miss Althea.

For what purpose? Surely not for love, on a hot Saturday afternoon with his wife only next door, especially not if what he told Webster about the affair's being over was true. For hate then? Possibly. Webster might himself have fanned that hatred with a final straw, the implication that Althea planned to cheat her former confederate in the matter of the Cézanne.

Miss Althea might be having a bad time of it, but the possibility only made Webster chuckle. She'd been overdue for it a good long while. He hoped Johnson was upholding the honor of their sex against that formidable adversary, and he resolved to return the emptied ice trays as soon as he had finished the dishes.

He whistled a gay tune, feeling lighter in heart than he had in the past two days. Some nice things had happened this week, along with the bad. Mr. Johnson had seen the error of his trifling, and would return to being a good husband to Miss Priscilla He had also retired from the wicked business of forging modern masterpieces Things might be on the upbeat for him, with all sorts of happiness ahead.

For instance, Mr. Rutherford's death had released Johnson's grandfather-in-law from the binding contract. If

Johnson utilized the aptitudes God gave him, his presentable personality, his business know-how, his drive, he could raise the financial backing for the fireproofing venture in jig time. Then success would be assured. Webster was so confident of it that he would be willing to risk a portion of his savings on a few shares in the corporation. No doubt of it, Johnson Taylor, boy tycoon, was on his way.

Webster stopped whistling. He rubbed a cloth clockwise around an already clean plate to the total of twenty-three hours, then told himself he should be speeding instead of slowing up, because maybe what was going on in Miss Althea's apartment was not a battle of words alone. She might really be in danger.

If, for instance, she had lied only a little in her recital of Wednesday night's events and could positively identify Mr. Rutherford's late caller, having opened the door and confronted him, she'd be safe only as long as that person trusted her. If he began to doubt, to believe that she would double-cross him on a simple thing like half ownership of a Cézanne, his faith might be completely destroyed. All this, of course, assuming that the visitor's name was Johnson Taylor.

Johnson had an awful lot to gain from Rutherford's murder; preventing its disclosure would fully warrant taking another life, if it seemed practicable.

Webster picked up the ice trays and fairly flew to the door, not even glancing into the living room to count the noses of lingering guests. Up the red stairs he ran, across the roof and down the green flight, trying to calm himself, to remember that all the chips were not yet down and that Miss Althea might be perfectly safe for the simple reason that she was herself the murderer. There was nothing but her not infallible word to say she wasn't, but he was being guided by instinct, not reason, and the spurs were urgent.

He found her door ajar; because his hands were full of ice trays he did not close it behind him. There was no one in the living room, not a sound anywhere. He swerved

into the bedroom. Althea wasn't there, nor in the adjoining bath.

He went into the kitchen, slackened his pace, telling himself he was being a melodramatic fool, that Miss Althea, cucumber cool, might have returned to the Randalls' party, maybe to smile in amusement at his precipitous haste to return her ice trays.

He set them down, asking himself would she do that. Not would she smile if she saw him hastening on an errand for her, jumping through hoops, being the perfect if slightly behindtime servant. That she would definitely do, but would she go to the Randalls' and leave the door to her apartment open? Careless she was, but not quite in that degree.

He went to her dressing room, the interior of which was concealed by a Sadie Thompson bead curtain, a horseplay bit of decoration she had picked up in a theatrical warehouse. The beads tinkled musically as he poked his head through, then crashed against the wall in a dissonant chord as he thrust them aside.

He had found Miss Althea.

She was lying on the floor, all bloodied and *unsoignée*. Her throat was jaggedly slit from ear to ear (the clichés rushed to his mind). Beside her lay the greatest cliché of all, the weapon that had done her in.

It was a razor. A straight razor. Straight out of song and story, of hundreds of Tom shows, of jokes and bum vaudeville wheezes. The sight of it sickened Webster more than that of Althea's corpse had done. Someone's after you, boy, he thought; someone's trying to leave this little baby on your doorstep.

He stooped over it, heard the curtain swish in the opposite direction, looked over his shoulder to see Bill Patterson regarding the scene with horror. He lost his balance, steadied himself with a hand on the floor, barely an inch from the razor.

"I wouldn't touch that, Webster," Bill warned. "Leave it where it is."

Webster straightened up, turned. "No, sir, you're darn right I wouldn't touch it," he said. "I wouldn't want it to have my fingerprints."

He was aware that it had everything else but.

18

BILL CALLED the police, who got there surprisingly quickly. Webster had barely had time to exchange his white jacket for the Prince Albert which had been hanging in Miss Althea's kitchen since the funeral, a more suitable garment, he felt, in which to play what would surely be one of the bigger scenes of his life.

The pair of uniformed patrolmen were soon joined by a lieutenant from Homicide and his assistant. It was Lieutenant Casey, a soft-spoken, polite, obviously sensitive young man, who suggested that they adjourn to Rutherford's apartment for interrogation, leaving a policéman to guard Althea's body until the medical examiner got there.

The curious but irrelevant guests at the Randalls' funeral party had been weeded out and sent about their business. The Randalls were here now, the Taylors, and Bill Patterson, of course. Johnson, as the last person known to have spoken to Althea, was telling his story.

"She and Webster were in some sort of hassle when I arrived," he said. "I could hear her screaming all the way up on the roof. I don't know what it was about, but she was very angry."

Lieutenant Casey regarded Webster speculatively, yet without open antagonism. He was a man he could talk to, Webster perceived, not one with a mass of preconceived convictions to addle his judgment.

"Lieutenant," he began, "could I ask Mr. Taylor a question?"

"Certainly." Casey did not hesitate. "We've got a prob-

lem here, and we have to find the answer. Maybe it will help if the panel kicks it around a little. Ask away, Mr. Flagg."

Webster welcomed the "Mr. Flagg" into his heart. It was an indication that he was to be treated with no less respect than the other suspects, not here, not within these four walls while Lieutenant Casey was in command.

"You lied to me, Mr. Johnson," Webster scolded. "You said you came to Miss Althea's to get some ice because you couldn't pry it out of your own refrigerator. You know that wasn't the truth."

Johnson blushed, glanced at his wife obliquely. "I wanted to get you out of the room so I could talk to Althea alone," he admitted.

Casey's assistant scribbled something in his open notebook. Casey, interest sparking his eyes, asked, "Why?"

"It's a personal matter," Johnson fenced. "The whole thing's entirely too personal to be gone into here."

"You'd be surprised," the lieutenant said sharply. "Murder has a way of turning things inside out. Some of the most intimate facts get a public airing. Answer the question, Mr. Taylor."

Priscilla looked as if she were going to cry. Johnson put a protective arm around her.

"If you insist," he capitulated, "although it has no bearing upon the murder. Althea Tamblyn and I have been close friends for years. I suddenly decided this afternoon that I didn't want to play any more. I wanted to lose no time in telling her, but you don't say a thing like that with a third party in the room. That's why I had to get rid of Webster, and I said the first thing that popped into my mind, about the ice."

Priscilla's tears were routed by a dazzling smile, it was evident that she did not doubt the credibility of the witness Casey's assistant did not seem so sanguine. He had a whispered consultation with his superior, who said aloud:

"Let's leave that for a minute. Mr. Taylor has an alibi

for the time when Mr. Patterson heard the scuffling in Miss Tamblyn's apartment. Mr. Taylor was back at the Randall place, or so everyone there has said."

He faced Bill. "Mr. Patterson, could we have that story again in detail for the record?"

Bill began, speaking slowly and carefully: "I was taking a nap in my room back there, which is flush against Miss Tamblyn's dressing room. At first I thought that what had awakened me was a bad dream. There were the sounds of a struggle, yelps that almost didn't seem human, a sort of smothered scream, then a thud.

"Afternoon naps always make me groggy. I kept telling myself it *was* a dream, and dozing off again. It took me several moments, maybe a quarter of an hour to come fully awake. Then I got up, put on my shoes, and went across the hall. I found Webster bending over the body. He was reaching toward the razor, as if he was going to pick it up and get rid of it."

Priscilla frowned. "But," she stammered, "if he killed her, why would he still be standing there fifteen minutes later?"

David Randall looked down his nose superciliously. "His race," he said, "is not noted for bravery. He had probably been trying to summon up enough courage to approach the body. Miss Tamblyn customarily wore some rather valuable rings, a star sapphire, an emerald-cut diamond. Is she wearing them now?"

At a signal from Casey the assistant trudged across the hall, returning in a minute to announce that Althea's hands were bare.

"I propose that we search Webster," David said hostilely.

"But that's foolishness," Webster protested. "I've worked for Miss Althea eight years. Those aren't the only pieces of jewelry she owns. She's got a mess of it, wears what she chooses to, sometimes none at all and leaves the stuff at home in an unlocked drawer. I wouldn't have had to kill her to get it, if I had wanted it."

"Nevertheless"—David was being stubborn—"I think he should be searched."

Webster shrugged. "Okay," he said confidently, "but you're just wasting the gentlemen's time. I'll help you, so's we can get it over with."

He emptied his trouser pockets, tossing keys, loose change, lighter, and cigarettes onto a table, then pulled the gray linings out and shook them. He dove into the right-hand pocket of the Prince Albert, found it empty as he knew he would. Then he tried the left-hand pocket.

His fingers contracted convulsively upon things which should not be there, which could not be there even in this less than perfect world. Fear mushroomed within him; whoever was out to get him was making a good job of covering all exits.

He withdrew his hand and opened it. On the pink-brown palm rested Miss Althea's star sapphire, the emerald-cut diamond. And three marijuana cigarettes. . . .

19

THEY WERE ALL staring at him. Priscilla, who had moaned his name, looked dismayed, but there were always dismayed women in mobs, with their impotent sympathies, their wholly ineffectual attempts at moderation.

"Those things were planted on me," he said weakly. "You've just got to believe me. I'm innocent."

So he would be proven to be, he tried to reassure himself, but it would take a little time. He foresaw trials, appeals, reopenings, and who could afford such things? People like him were often forced, by economic necessity, into becoming a Cause, the mascot of this or that conspiring little group, who paid your lawyers' fees and asked, in return, only your soul to be made over into their own

image. The thing in life Webster wanted least was to be the subject of a rally in Union Square.

Priscilla spoke up. "I believe you, Webster," she said. "Why *would* you kill Althea to get her jewelry that was always accessible to you? And why would you take only the things she was wearing?"

David had an explanation: "Perhaps the robbery was only incidental. He may have slit Miss Tamblyn's throat for quite different reasons, then availed himself of the opportunity to make a little profit on the side."

He was strutting up and down, trying the case for the prosecution. "As to motive, I've got a pretty good idea. I've suspected all along that the death of my cousin Mortimer Rutherford was no accident."

For Casey's benefit he sketched the outline of the penultimate tragedy in these apartments. He pointed a shaking finger at Webster, intoning, "I accuse this vicious character, this marijuana smoker, of murdering my cousin."

Why didn't the boy grow up, Webster thought irritatedly. Things were bad enough without his practicing law just now. He wouldn't hire David Randall if his life depended upon it.

"Miss Tamblyn," David pursued, "was killed because she knew who had killed Cousin Mortimer. The same person perpetrated both crimes."

Webster silently and wholly agreed with him on that point, while reserving the right to call another the assassin. As he saw it, the field narrowed down to two, Bill Patterson and Johnson Taylor.

Take Bill first. Assume he was here instead of in Washington Wednesday night, happily blowing tea in his room, thinking Rutherford was away. Rutherford walks in, and there ensues the conversation Althea heard through the walls from her dressing room. End of Rutherford.

But how about the chair? Where would Bill get an unfireproofed chair Wednesday night?

But why would he have to get it Wednesday night? Priscilla didn't find the body until about eleven o'clock

Thursday morning. Bill would have had plenty of time to get a new chair and burn Rutherford up in it that very morning, especially with the assistance of Miss Althea, who had an office full of them.

Althea may have helped with the phone call to Priscilla, timing the finding of the body to Bill's convenience. She may have cooperated with him all along the way, in a sort of *quid pro quo* arrangement which involved Bill's withholding what information he may have gathered about the Picasso.

Then they fell out. Bill killed Althea and stuffed her rings and the reefers, to which he alone had ready access, in Webster's pocket. End of Webster.

But there was still Johnson Taylor, who could have collaborated with Althea in the same way. Webster was loath to relinquish this prior suspect, but he couldn't rightly see where the reefers fitted into the Johnson story.

Or didn't they, in an indirect way? An idea swatted him unexpectedly: Johnson had an alibi for the time Bill said Althea was being killed. But was Bill to be believed? If it could be demonstrated that he was a marijuana smoker, that he might have been on a kick that very afternoon when he claimed to have been taking a nap, reliance on his time sense was at an end.

Webster walked over to Lieutenant Casey. "Leaving the rings out of it, sir," he whispered, "those reefers don't belong to me. It follows that the same somebody that slipped them in my pocket killed Miss Althea.

"I hate weed notoriously, as all my friends will be glad to tell you. For years I've gone around talking to kids who have the habit, trying to get them off it. I can tell a hip smoker from a square the moment I see him light up. If you'll just let me pass one of these sticks around I might be able to inform you who owns it."

The corners of Casey's eyes crinkled. His assistant looked shocked.

"You're not going to let him do it, are you, Case?" he asked. "It sure wouldn't look good at headquarters if we

and a bunch of suspects had a tea party of a Saturday afternoon."

"You're so right," Casey drawled. "It's a little out of order, but what say we try it?"

Webster smiled his gratitude. If he'd had an idea there was anyone like Casey at headquarters he would have gone there on Thursday instead of wasting two days, getting himself deeper and deeper into the mire, getting poor Miss Althea killed.

"I'll start with Mr. Bill," he said.

Bill took hold of the reefer gingerly, then lit it, holding it in his fingers as one would an ordinary cigarette, crushing it. He inhaled, instead of taking gulps of air in with the smoke. His face contorted in distaste. He coughed. He let the light die out, and when he lit up again he choked. Then he turned green and gagged, rushed for the bathroom.

Webster followed to hold his head, thinking Bill Patterson was a square if he had ever seen one.

"Mr. Bill, you sure as hell ain't no viper," he said as soon as Bill could listen. "How is it that I found incontrovertible proof of reefer smoking in your room?"

"Rutherford," Bill gasped. "He loved the stuff. Had to have it every so often or go off his rocker. That's why he let me stay here, so I could stand watch over him, make sure all fires were out before he went to sleep. He'd do it in my room——"

"I know." Webster stopped him. "Let's not waste time talking about that. What I've got to learn is if you were here Wednesday night. If you were, maybe you saw something or heard something which would help me off this hook I am on."

"I wasn't here. I didn't leave Washington until Thursday afternoon."

"You fibbed to me," Webster reproached. "You let on you were freshly back Friday morning when you phoned me."

"Plenty of people can verify the fact that I was in Washington Wednesday night and the next forenoon. It's just that I made a detour through Brooklyn on the way home. I read about the fire in the afternoon papers and went out there to cheer up Mrs. Taylor's grandfather.

"It didn't occur to me that this might be murder. I was only thinking that the old boy's fireproofing formula had flopped when put to the test of an unsupervised marijuana spree by Rutherford. We talked far into the night, so I decided to stay over there."

Webster was sure that one topic under discussion had been Mr. Hartman's new side line. When Bill heard about the paint and the secrecy surrounding its manufacture, he must have begun to understand what Mr. Rutherford had been driving at the preceding Monday. No wonder he was so upset, after he had puzzled it through, knowing that his sweet Priscilla's husband and grandfather were up to their necks in a racket which might at any moment be discovered.

He hadn't seen the forest of murder for the trees of art thievery. Now he must be vaguely aware, as Webster was acutely, that Johnson Taylor had probably done in both victims. Any normal man would have been glad at this chance to get his old girl back. Mr. Bill merely looked miserable and inadequate.

"I think I'm going to be sick again," he announced. That plan of his, at least, was perfectly executed.

Casey's assistant knocked on the bathroom door, simultaneously opening it. "Come on out of there," he ordered. "We ain't got all day. The boss wants a recap on where everyone was when the dame was cut."

Webster followed obediently, trailed by a limp Bill Patterson.

"Ah, Mr. Flagg." The lieutenant greeted him sarcastically. "I think we'll cancel the balance of your experiment in favor of a more direct approach."

Something had put him out of temper during the last

few minutes. Webster guessed it was because Casey was getting nowhere. The only suspect against whom he had found a shred of evidence was Webster himself, yet he was reluctant to make the arrest, was painstakingly trying to break down the story of one of the others.

Johnson Taylor was reviewing, in almost the same words he had used before, his visit to Althea, his return to the Randalls', his acceptance of a drink from his host. He told it plausibly, yet Webster knew he must be lying.

It was reasonable to suppose that Mr. Rutherford, with his mania for self-preservation, had used an auxiliary reefer-sitter on those occasions when Patterson was away, and Johnson was a logical choice; he lived close by, and he was an ambitious employee to whom this unique manner of apple polishing might appeal. Wednesday night, during the course of this overtime stint, Rutherford must have revealed his knowledge of Johnson's complicity in the theft of the Picasso. So Johnson killed him and later killed Althea, when he believed he could no longer trust her. Nevertheless, he now vowed quite convincingly that he had been in the Randalls' apartment when Althea was killed.

Casey sighed in exasperation and abruptly shifted his attention to David Randall. David, on the other hand, seemed to have withdrawn from the group, to be bored by this continued probing into a problem to which he had already provided the solution, like a kid losing interest in a game he feels he has long since won. He had turned his back on the room, was gazing out the window at the river.

"Where were you when Mr. Patterson heard the disturbance?" Casey asked him a second time.

David turned then, frowning in concentration, hesitating just long enough to let his wife commit what is statistically considered a wife's worst fault: she answered for him.

"He was out mailing a special-delivery letter," she said chattily, "an acknowledgment of one he'd received earlier from Cousin Mortimer's attorney that Davey works for, about the will."

"Will?" Johnson Taylor exclaimed.

David ignored him, arguing, "You're wrong, Marjorie. I mailed the letter much earlier than that."

"No you didn't," she insisted blithely. "Don't you remember? Webster had filled the ice bucket and taken the trays into the kitchen. Johnson Taylor came in and you made him a drink. Then you told me you were going out to mail the letter."

"You're wrong," David repeated tensely. "You're crazy."

Couldn't she hear the peril in his voice? Didn't she have the wit to keep those full, red lips of hers closed? She parted them. "But——" She fumbled.

Johnson Taylor interrupted her: "I believe she's right. Come to think of it, I don't remember seeing him in the room for some time after he fixed that drink."

"And I'm sure he didn't go out to do it earlier," Priscilla pitched in. "He was where I could see him all afternoon, near the bar."

As they spoke David strode across the room to stand before Margie. "Why can't you keep quiet," he harangued, "you idiot!" And he struck her with the back of his hand, the signet ring with the Rutherford crest sculpting her dimpled cheek, a fingernail pinking her chin.

"But, Davey," she wailed. "I mentioned it only because I knew that dozens of people would have seen you in the street, at the mailbox, and nobody could have seen you at the party then because you simply weren't there. I was only trying to help."

"I don't need your help," David said imperiously. "Now or ever. I should have listened to my family instead of marrying such a little fool."

She winced, as she had not done at the blow. "I'm sorry," he apologized, not to her but to the detective. "I've been under somewhat of a strain today, naturally. Mrs. Randall may possibly be right about the time I went to the mailbox. It's merely that I resented her pre-emption, a bad habit of hers. I'm quite capable of answering for myself."

He sounded exactly like his relative, Webster thought,

almost as though Mr. Rutherford's ghost had moved in on him. Webster also resented Mrs. Randall's ill-timed remarks, which might serve to divert Lieutenant Casey from the trail leading to Johnson's arrest, but even more he censured the husband's reaction to them.

"If I may be permitted," he said "I'll go fetch some iodine for Miss Margie's face."

"Okay," Casey said, deeply preoccupied.

He went into the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet. There were two electric razors in there, Mr. Bill's and Mr. Rutherford's. Every man in these apartments used an electric razor. In fact, despite its ubiquitous place in legend, Webster had not seen a straight razor in years, not since he was a little boy, when his mother used to use one for cutting out patterns, for opening seams. Mrs. Flagg had been an ardent sewing woman.

He almost dropped the bottle of iodine. It jittered against the rim of the washbasin until he steadied his hand, steadied his thoughts so they wouldn't scatter every which way but come out in an orderly line, like toothpaste from a tube.

After a moment he went to the entrance of the living room and beckoned to the lieutenant.

"May I speak with you, sir?" he asked. "In private?"

Casey came over to him, adjusting his shoulder holster, not saying, "I'm armed. I wouldn't try any funny business," but tacitly implying it.

Webster cleared his throat. "If you could just deputize me, so to speak," he said, "I think I could clean this thing up for you in a few minutes."

The lieutenant regarded him soberly. After a while, "Okay, it's a deal," he drawled. "I'm not getting much of anywhere on my own. But I warn you that if you can't implicate someone else I'm taking you as a material witness."

"I know that, Lieutenant, sir," he whispered, and marched into the room.

20

HE STOOD with his back against the wall, literally and figuratively. "Act, Webster," he told himself, "act harder than you ever did before. Give the performance of your career in a role strange to you, be everything you have, deliberately and by inclination, not been before. Be rude, insulting, aggravating. Make him mad.

"Mr. Randall," he began, "I don't usually play games of tit for tat, but you accused me of murder and I'm slapping it right back at you."

"He's insane," David shouted. "Lock him up, or not one of us is safe."

"Hold your horses, sonny," Webster sneered, throwing himself into the part. "You're not so smart yourself. If you were out mailing a letter while Miss Althea was being killed, when are we to suppose you wrote it? Miss Priscilla said you were in her clear view all the time, standing by the bar. You got a pen that writes under brandy?"

David rushed toward him, picking up the chair which was like the one in which Rutherford died, holding it high above his head by the slender back legs. Its weight must have seemed inadequate for his purposes, for he suddenly wheeled and heaved it back toward the other end of the room. It struck the lieutenant's shins, tripping him, sending him sprawling, and broke in a jumble that impeded help's way to Webster.

Randall got to Webster. His hands were spread like bat wings, thumbs inward, points twitching, itching to get at that dark throat, to strangle, to silence.

Casey righted himself, hurdled the chair's smashed seat. "Temper, temper, Mr. Randall," he chided.

The bat wings folded as the handcuffs were snapped on. "Take him away, boys," Casey ordered over his shoulder.

"Charge him with disorderly conduct and resisting an officer." He stroked an injured shinbone. "I'll stay here and get the rest of the dope on him."

The assistant and one of the uniformed patrolmen escorted Randall to the door. There they paused. David's eyes swept the room, taking it all in, the antiques, the collection, the possessions he would never possess in peace and joy. Then he was gone.

"My, oh my," Webster said shakily. "That sure is an impulsive boy."

21

IT WAS GETTING LATE. With a smile for the picayunity of the trifle, Webster realized that he had done this day's work for free. There was slight chance that David Randall would ever pay him, and Miss Margie looked far too woebegone to be bothered with such details.

Lieutenant Casey leaned forward eagerly. "Tell it in your own way, Mr. Flagg," he urged. "What I saw a few minutes ago, plus the discrepancy about the letter writing which I also had noticed, convince me that Randall is guilty. Now I want some facts."

Webster turned to Margie Randall. "Would you like to go home, ma'am?" he asked solicitously. "All this must be pretty hard on you."

"I'd rather she stayed," Casey countermanded. "We may need her for corroboration."

"I'll stay," she agreed. She smiled wanly, only a shadow of a dimple showing with the scar of David's ring deep upon it. "It's all over between David and me, now that I know what he really is. I want to help you."

"You helped already, Miss Margie," Webster told her. "At least calling you to mind showed me the way. I hap-

pened to remember the only person in my life I ever saw use a straight razor was my mother, when she was sewing. I knew you'd made those slip covers, your clothes and all, so I figured there might very well be such a razor in your house. Then you mentioned a will, and I could see Mr. Randall's motive for killing Mr. Rutherford. He wasn't left very much, was he?"

"Only a dollar. Cousin Mortimer made out the will Wednesday night, in duplicate. It was witnessed by those two brothers who run the ice-cream parlor down the street. He sent one copy to the law office, another to the lawyer's home on Fire Island. When the lawyer got home from a fishing trip and found it, he wrote Davey special delivery. Davey showed me the letter."

"Doesn't that seem strange?" Priscilla broke in. "I mean you'd think the witnesses would have read of Mort's death in the newspapers and suspected something fishy about the coincidence."

"Darling"—Johnson patted her hand—"that parlor's a bookie joint. The brothers read nothing but racing news."

"Althea was to get the collection"—Margie enumerated the bequests upon her finger tips—"the remnants of which go to the Metropolitan Museum upon her death. The employees get Rutherford Associates. And you, Webster, you get these apartment houses. You're our new landlord!"

"My goodness," he breathed. "Isn't that just the grandest thing? Did he really do that?"

He looked grave again, saying, "I knew I must have been mentioned, because Miss Althea wasn't killed until after Mr. Randall read the letter, and the way she was killed, the rings and the reefers in my pocket, all added up to a fancy frame made just for me. I knew Mr. Randall was trying to get even with me for something. But I didn't really expect the"—he paused, then used the phrase aloud for the first time, rolling the syllables—"the real-estate holdings."

There was a murmur of congratulations, which he

accepted with a genuine effort at modesty. "Poor Mr. Rutherford"—he gave thanks where due—"and poor Miss Althea.

"Of course she didn't get killed just to make me look bad. She had it coming, because she knew Mr. Randall had murdered his cousin. I'd have known myself, if I'd just taken time and trouble to think it through, though I didn't know until this morning, when a second fireproofed chair was found in the basement, that there were two of them. I had misbelieved Miss Priscilla's statement to that effect."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "That'll teach you," she teased.

"The chairs told the story," he explained. "There were six in all, the four original ones, the one you bought, Miss Priscilla, and one bought by David Randall. In the first batch, two were fireproofed. One stood here, the other at Miss Althea's. Likewise, there were two *un*fireproof ones, one at the Randalls', one at Taylors'. It followed that the fireproof one from here had been swapped with one of the others.

"Miss Althea knew it wasn't the Taylors' one because she'd lifted that off them Thursday night. So it had to be the Randalls'. Didn't you see her face light up last evening when she tried to make a date with Randall? Later, when she found out about Miss Margie's covering the furniture she was smiling like a Chessy cat.

"She was planning on trading her silence about the murder for his about something crooked she was up to which I'll tell you about in a minute. I think she tackled him on the subject this afternoon at the party. There was one time when she was talking to him awful hard. That was when the special arrived. He read it, and knew that he had lost his bargaining position. He just had to kill her, and get me in a fix to boot."

He then outlined the art swindle, leaving Johnson Taylor and Priscilla's grandfather out of it. Having aided the law, he felt he could take a few liberties with it; the Met-

ropolitan Museum could just go patch its own Picasso.

"Mr. Rutherford," he continued, "had more than one string to his bow that Wednesday evening when he went to such pains to make it look like he was going to be out of town. Not only did he wish to catch Miss Althea slipping back the picture, he wanted to snoop in the Randall place, to identify the nonexistent Peters, the Harvey that shared the apartment. So he gave Randall a pair of tickets, hoping they'd get careless because they thought he was away and leave a few scraps of evidence around the place.

"He reckoned without its being Wednesday. On Wednesdays the evidence, the fluffy stuff, was locked in a closet against me. Miss Margie was downtown that afternoon, met her husband and went to the theater, so she hadn't had a chance to unlock it.

"Mr. Rutherford borrowed Mrs. Mueller's keys, but he didn't go sniffing through the apartment like he made up to tell you, Miss Priscilla. He was the whole time in the Randall's place across the hall from you, hacking down the door. And what he found he didn't like. So he made out a will disinheriting Mr. Randall and mailed it.

"I knew Rutherford like a book. He'd have to tell David what he'd done, to watch him squirm, so he got him over here. They sat in Mr. Bill's room." He broke off. "Tell them about Mr. Rutherford's smoking reefers, will you, Mr Bill? My throat's tired."

He went out to the kitchen for a drink of water. When he returned, Bill was saying that Randall used to procure the stuff for Rutherford, therefore knew all about it, and doubtlessly took over the watching when Bill was away.

"I bet I know who sold it to him," Webster added. "A squinty-eyed little devil who runs an elevator in the building where he works."

"That clears up a mystery for me," Margie said. "Not that it matters any more, but it used to worry me. Every so often there'd be a telephone call or a note slipped under our door late at night, and David would go out on an unexplained errand. There was a note Wednesday night,

when we got home. I was scared to be left alone, what with the closet's having been broken into, but David said he had to go."

"When he heard about the will," Webster resumed, "he lost control—we've all seen how good he is at that—and stabbed Rutherford with the shears that were on the dresser. Through the heart, I should guess, judging from the way the spots lay on the bed. Then he took the fire-proofed chair over to his apartment to swap for the other one. Are you a sound sleeper, Miss Margie?"

"Terribly," she admitted. "Davey"—the diminutive was pathetic, issuing from her stricken mouth—"was always taunting me about it. When he'd go out on these little jaunts at night I'd fall asleep with the radio blaring in my ear. He said it proved I was a peasant."

"Well he must have loved you for it Wednesday night. He was able to switch the chairs without disturbing you, and to get a bottle of cleaning fluid out of your kitchen.

"Miss Althea heard him coming back in here the second time. He tied Mr. Rutherford up in the chair, poured some cleaning fluid over him, and lit the fire. He cleaned a few spots off the rug he'd made dragging the body in, and those on the bed. I found the empty bottle in the scrap basket. And he washed the shears, threw them soaking wet on the dresser, where they'd got tangled up with some string.

"When the fire was nearly out and he was sure nothing else would catch, he turned out the lights and went home. Early the next morning he gave his wife money for the slip-cover material, then went to the office before anyone else was there, to go through the mail and tear up the will. He didn't reckon on a copy's being sent to the lawyer's home. He didn't know his cousin as well as I do. My Rutherford was a *t* crosser, who well foresaw what Randall would do with the original if he could get to it.

"Then he went to a store, bought a new chair, brought it home. That's the one Miss Margie covered when she

got back from her shopping expedition. The fireproof one he'd hidden in the coalbin."

Lieutenant Casey stood up. "Thanks for the fill-in, Mr. Flagg," he said. "I'll have to borrow that fancy coat of yours for a going over in the laboratory. Randall must have left prints on it, and all through Tamblyn's apartment. I'll get it back to you as quickly as possible, and I wouldn't be at all surprised if the department gave you some kind of citation for your help on the case."

Webster, beaming, removed the Prince Albert. "I'd like that fine," he said. "Just be sure they spell my name with two *g's*. A one-g Flag makes me madder than a red one."

Casey grinned, shook his hand, nodded to the others, and left them.

Webster scratched his head. "I don't rightly know how I can get home without a coat"—he pondered—"less'n I can borrow one of yours, Mr. Bill."

"Oh, Webster, don't go yet," Priscilla coaxed. "I'm hungry, and I'm sure all of us are. Couldn't you stay and fix us a little spaghetti or something?"

He was bone-tired and brain-weary from doing work a bit out of his line, but what Priscilla suggested was right up his alley. The folks were hungry, and there was that spaghetti recipe Caruso had confided to him.

He straightened his spine, tugging the knots out of it. "Sure, Miss Priscilla," he said. "Surely. I'd be glad to oblige."